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THE ROMANTICS AND THEIR SHAKESPEARE

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Shakespeare was the birth of character criticism, or, in the words of Romantic critic Charles Lamb, the desire "to know the internal workings and movements of a great mind, of an Othello or a Hamlet for instance, the when and the why and the how far they should be moved." Strangely, despite an intense interest in Shakespeare's characters, Romantic authors thought his plays singularly unfit for the stage, and plays of the Romantic era were unsuccessful. The Romantic playwrights had to contend with the remarkable and influential legacy of Shakespeare--a tradition which they tried to emulate--and their desires to maintain their own original creativity. They created a large body of important and successful poetry, and many bad plays. A study of the Shakespeare productions of the Romantic period, combined with an examination of the products of the Romantic authors themselves, will provide answers to the following questions.

- 1) How did the eighteenth-century productions of Shakespeare's works anticipate the Romantic reaction to Shakespeare?
- 2) How did the legacy of Shakespeare affect the Romantic writers? Specifically, how did the Romantics interpret Shakespeare, and how did his plays combine with the Romantic vision to produce literature of the Romantic era?
- 3) Given the intense interest in Shakespeare's drama, and the exhaustive analysis of the characters in his creations, why did the Romantic authors produce such unsuccessful plays?
- 4) Finally, what problems and issues are raised for the modern reader by the attempts of the Romantics to deal with Shakespeare?

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"The Romantics and Their Shakespeare:  
the Struggle of Emulation and Imagination."

A Trident Scholar Project Report

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### THE ROMANTICS AND THEIR SHAKESPEARE:

### THE STRUGGLE OF EMULATION AND IMAGINATION

#### Abstract

A consequence of the Romantic movement was a profound preoccupation with "character"--the desire to understand the human psyche through the exploration of personalities created through literature. Authors and playwrights of the Romantic era turned to Shakespeare's works, both to seek inspiration for their own efforts, and to attempt a comprehension of the many rich and complex characters of Shakespeare's own creation. One result of this fascination with Shakespeare was the birth of character criticism, or, in the words of Romantic critic Charles Lamb, the desire "to know the internal workings and movements of a great mind, of an Othello or a Hamlet for instance, the when and the why and the how far they should be moved." Strangely, despite an intense interest in Shakespeare's characters, Romantic authors thought his plays singularly unfit for the stage, and plays of the Romantic era were unsuccessful. The Romantic playwrights had to contend with the remarkable and influential legacy of Shakespeare--a tradition which they tried to emulate--and their desires to maintain their own original creativity. They created a large body of important and successful poetry, and many bad plays.

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2) How did the legacy of Shakespeare affect the Romantic writers? Specifically, how did the Romantics interpret Shakespeare, and how did his plays combine with the Romantic vision to produce literature of the Romantic era?

3) Given the intense interest in Shakespeare's drama, and the exhaustive analysis of the characters in his creations, why did the Romantic authors produce such unsuccessful plays?

4) Finally, what problems and issues are raised for the modern reader by the attempts of the Romantics to deal with Shakespeare?

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### Preface

The Romantic Era, a time of intense change in both society and literature, produced masses of fine poetry and many very bad plays. The paradox of coexisting but qualitatively different genres appears all the more intriguing in light of the Romantics' idolization of Shakespeare. My purpose is to explain the failure of the great Romantic poets to write good drama.

First some definition and limitation is in order. By the Romantic Age I mean the literary, philosophical, and social movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I have limited myself to English literature but have included Goethe's Faust because it strongly influenced the Romantic movement. When I discuss the Romantics I am usually referring to the Romantic poets--Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Byron. Similarly, Romantic drama means the score or so plays of those five poets, not the hundreds of stereotypical Gothic melodramas that flooded the English stage at that time.

As with any study as large as one of Romantic drama, the principle subject cannot be examined in complete isolation. As we shall see, the products of Romanticism were in many ways the result of centuries of development in thought. That is why I have spent so much time on the

development of the English theater tradition, the character of the English stage both before and during the eighteenth century, and the philosophical trends from Shakespeare to the Romantics.

Not only must Romantic drama be examined as a small part of a much larger movement but drama itself cannot be discussed without reference to theater--for theater is the material manifestation of dramatic thought. This explains the need, in the first chapter, of defining the relationship between drama and the theater.



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## Chapter One: Drama and the Theater

Drama and the theater are not synonymous. Drama is a body of literature that tells stories about characters and their conflicts and relationships. The theater is a group of actors, directors, and technicians that transforms the written word of drama into a visual art and a shared expression. Drama's latent impact silently awaits theatrical expression. The theater is the mechanism by which drama emerges from the actors and springs from the printed page to realize existence. Because the theater needs a host of workers to function properly, the theater takes on some peculiar characteristics as it fulfills its role of linking the playwright's mind to the world. The theater is an industry and a pastime, an art form and a social event; the theater needs an audience and is shaped by that audience. And the theater cannot exist without drama to portray. While we may satisfactorily study drama as literature, we cannot fully understand drama without recognizing and evaluating the theater as the context of dramatic expression.

A well-known riddle asks what sound a tree in a forest makes when it falls out of human earshot. Though the answer to this only partly rhetorical question will

never be known, we know what "sound" drama makes when it is performed in an empty theater--none. The theater demands an audience. The audience sees and hears the performance, evaluates the substance of the drama and the technique of the production, and judges the merit of the work as a whole. Whether consciously or not, the audience is the final arbiter of the theater. While a playwright may write as long and as much as he pleases, no performer or production can continue without a supportive audience. The distinction is crucial: drama needs only a creative playwright to exist, the theater demands an audience that not only pays admission but receives and judges a performance.

Far from being a passive witness of the performers' work, the audience actually shapes that work. Art forms such as painting and sculpture are reflective in the sense that the response the art work evokes in the mind of the audience is one of meditation and largely uncommunicated thought. The link between the artist and the audience, the artwork, remains unchanged. In contrast, dramatic art is reflexive in that the audience response is immediately expressed and shared. Most significantly, that response affects the artwork as it is being created. The actors modify their creation in response to the audience reaction. The dramatic art is

unique in the dynamic relationship between the creators (actors) and audience. Not only can the audience shape the art form during the performance, but over a series of performances as well.

Because an audience of people sees a group of actors present the stories of people, theater is a social expression. Regardless of style or technique, playwrights write plays about people--and about people's values, needs, fears, and dreams. Throughout history, the theater has been patronized by widely varying cross-sections of society. Despite the vagaries of critical thought and attendance, the theater describes the society of mankind to the society of mankind.

A playwright expresses a singular and unique perception of society and life. Whether a play presents the life of a nation, society, individual, or idea, a playwright tells an audience about life as he sees it. The performers modify the playwright's perception through their own vision of reality. In Hamlet's words, the actors "...are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (Hamlet, Act II, sc. ii, l. 524). That vision of reality evokes reactions from an audience, and these reactions in turn form part of life. Drama becomes part of society's cultural consciousness through the attendance of an audience. The dramatic art inextricably

entwines itself in mankind's social existence as it reflects and alters life.

The dynamic relationship between artists and audience makes the theater a fluid art. The fact that each performance is an individual event means that every performance reproduces the playwright's vision differently every time. Every director interprets a play individually, and every actor reads his part individually. The constraints of time and human effort dictate that no two performances can ever be the same.

So far I have mentioned only actors as creators of the theater experience; on the contrary, theater is more than just performance. The efforts of a team of talented craftsmen result in a successful production. Good theater requires attention to sets, costumes, direction, makeup, lighting, technical assistance, promotion, and a host of activities that make drama an industry as well as a pastime.

Playwright, performers, and audience share a complex and dynamic relationship through the mediums of drama and the theater. The theater is a professional industry, social event, and medium of expression. The theater demands an audience, builds and imparts a reality, forces critical reaction, and reproduces and alters aspects of life. Drama is the written word that becomes a shared

reality through the magic of the theater.

## Chapter Two: The Theatrical Continuum

William Shakespeare's influence on English drama and literature is undeniable. If we are to judge his impact solely on the number of productions of his plays since his lifetime, or the number of books that owe their titles to him, or the familiarity to any English-speaking person of his characters, famous lines, and plays, we can only conclude that the debt Western literature owes to Shakespeare is enormous. Since his death Shakespeare has been commented upon, criticised, upheld, deplored, hailed, scorned, and emulated. Yet for all of his controversial genius Shakespeare was a mortal, a man who wrote a finite body of plays and then died, leaving his plays behind to tantalize and intrigue scholars and dramatists ever since. While the industry of the theater hummed along, and societies, public taste, and dramatic expression changed, Shakespeare's plays remained an elusive touchstone for the frustration and inspiration of later playwrights. After two centuries of societal and theatrical development and the continued existence and popularity of Shakespeare's works, the Romantic authors faced a problem. They confronted a heavy legacy of Shakespeare and his works, later adaptations of his plays, vast amounts of criticism, and the character of

the theater industry. The Romantics wrote under the burden of two major influences: Shakespeare's dramatic legacy, and history's theatrical legacy.

In the previous chapter I discussed the importance of recognizing the differences and relationships between drama and the theater. The development of the theater industry had important consequences for the writing of plays both in Shakespeare's time and later, and it is to the time of Shakespeare that the roots of the Romantic dramatic problem can be traced. The theater of the Shakespearean age was an industry of entertainment. A socially diverse and readily critical audience ruled the playhouses, and playwrights immersed themselves in all aspects of the theater as they attempted to please their hungry public.

The Shakespearean playwright was a truly involved person. Near-poverty was partly the reason for this involvement; playwrights received so little money for performances (according to tradition, Hamlet earned Shakespeare only five pounds(1)) that survival necessitated a more intimate relationship with the productions themselves. Indeed, playwrights "...were wretchedly paid, and...dramatists who did not don the sock or buskin but relied on their pens alone...too often faced long sojourns in debtors prisons..."(2)



Consequently a system of financial arrangements arose by which playwrights worked as part of the acting company for extra shares in the profits. Many playwrights were actor-sharers; they acted in their own plays.(3) Some playwrights, including Shakespeare, were housekeepers as well--they shared the playhouse owner's profits.(4) Thus in order to keep attendance affordable to the common man, and ensure their own financial security, playwrights had a hand in producing, directing, and acting in their own plays as a part of the acting company.

Playwrights, not actors, were the heroes of Shakespeare's time. There were no "stars" in the modern day sense.(5) Acting companies consisted largely of men who learned a number of parts at different times, and alternated roles. Although playwrights acted with the players, they were acclaimed not for portraying a particular part, but for creating the work as a whole. Clearly Shakespeare's was the age of the virtuoso playwright.

Assessing the audience's reactions to the virtuoso playwrights is more difficult. Little is known of the productions of Shakespeare's plays in his own time. We do know that despite low admission fees easily within reach of a commoner, Shakespeare's audiences (especially later in his life) tended to be gentlemanly and

refined.(6)

From 1642 until 1660, as a result of Puritan Parliamentary control, there was no English theater. This significant hiatus presented some special challenges to Restoration actors and directors in the lack of the continuity of the stage tradition. Post-Shakespearean producers could not follow in Shakespeare's footsteps and had instead to create their own traditions. Restoration theater was attended primarily by members of court, and directors tended towards large visual spectacles and ornate visual effects.(7) While the Restoration stage is a fascinating topic of research, we shall see that the changes to the theater in the eighteenth century more strongly influenced the Romantics of the nineteenth century.

The theater industry underwent several considerable changes during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Foremost among these changes was the altering face of the audiences. From the Restoration until 1672 the theater was patronized by Charles' court, and high prices kept the common crowd out. As London's population grew towards the end of the century, the audiences began to change. Critical opinion is still divided on the size and composition of theater audiences as the century drew to a close, but as we examine the first half of the

eighteenth century a discernable set of patterns begins to emerge. The ballooning population of London supported more playhouses, and audiences increased in diversity as well as size. After the death of Charles II, royal patronage was no longer an important factor. Audiences from all social classes were seen at the theater.(8)

The new audiences brought a change in taste with them. The desire for amusement drew audiences to the theater. They preferred comedy, especially social comedy. Out of 376 productions during Garrick's management of the Drury Lane playhouse in the mid-1700's, only twenty-five were successful sentimental plays.(9) Audiences were clearly motivated by the need for entertainment.

The vociferousness of the new audiences increased with their size and diversity. Audiences became harder to please and grew more vocal in the expression of their needs. This new unruliness manifested itself in hissing and booing and eventually in full scale rioting as the century wore on. Typical of these disturbances are the Half-Price Riots at Drury Lane of 25-26 January 1763. Audiences wanted to gain admission for half price after the third act of a play. When the managers refused to comply, the mob went wild and began to break chandeliers.(10) While such outrageous conduct was

scarcely the rule, the audience readily voiced their demands of the performers; by the 1770's,

Spectators called for prologue and epilogue when they were omitted after the ninth night; they called for particular tunes from the orchestra; they demanded and got explanations and apologies from actors and their management. To all of which those behind the scenes wisely responded as best they could.(11)

The audiences were clearly in control of the theater industry; they were "...a tyrannical mob, ready to howl down plays and destroy playhouses at the bidding of any faction momentarily in control, or, indeed, for no reason at all except to show in brutal fashion that it is master."(12)

Eighteenth-century audiences demanded and got what they wanted: social comedies. What is significant about the nature and content of the social comedies is that they represent the social consciousness of the age. The eighteenth century was a period of near-obsessive concern with social activities and decorum. People strongly emphasized social interaction, wit, manners, and grace. All of literature reflected an interest in group dynamics; the Augustans studied the individual only as a small part of a larger whole. Social comedies described

the activities of caricatured stereotypes with names like Mr. Backbite and Miss Pennypinch. Such characters became two-dimensional typifications of human attributes shared by ordinary men and women. In this way social comedies looked at mankind as a set of character-types instead of characters.

The creation of the character-type is the most visible dramatic application of a more influential set of underlying attitudes of the Augustan Age. The social comedy and the attention to refined social behavior betrays a latent belief that the most important aspect of life is the interaction between man and the world around him. Man was seen as the receptor of diverse stimuli from the outside world. This idea of external interchange found a voice through the writings of John Locke. Locke's Essay Concerning Humane Understanding was perhaps the most influential treatise of the age; his attitudes on the nature of knowledge and social existence decisively described and shaped eighteenth-century literature.(13) Locke believed that knowledge came as the result of sensations rather than from any kind of internal inspiration. John Locke's ideas of impression rather than inspiration directed the sentiments of the age.(14) Consequently, dramatists and reviewers were concerned with understanding how the mind is affected by

the environment.(15)

This theory of the impression of the world upon the mind of man begins to sound like Greek mimesis when it is applied to the performing arts. Art should mirror nature; as Dryden writes, a play should be "A just and lively Image of Humane Nature, representing its Passions and Humours, and the Changes of Fortune to which it is subject, for the Delight and Instruction of Mankind."(16) Samuel Johnson shares Dryden's beliefs when he claims that "the greatest graces of a play are to copy nature, and instruct life."(17) Both authors stress two points: that art should copy life, and art should "delight" and "instruct" society.

Of all the art forms, drama presented some special problems for Augustan authors. Having decided on the nature of art and devoted to proper social manners and form, they attacked many traditional dramatic conventions. Augustan authors gave special attention to technique. The adherence to the three unities was paramount. The three unities of time, place, and action were an important legacy of the Greek dramatic tradition. A play that follows the unities must have all its action take place in the time span covered by the actual time of performance. The location of all the scenes must be the same. Only one plot could be pursued, and sub-plots were

frowned upon. Adherence to the three unities seemed to be the best guarantee of lifelike drama. While the observance of the three unities was undertaken much more religiously in France than in England, and Samuel Johnson eventually attacked them in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare's works, the unities exerted considerable influence on eighteenth century dramatic literature. A violation of the three unities would offend the good sense of the Augustans. Dryden went so far as to congratulate himself for using them (in the preface to his play All for Love). (18)

Even basic literary techniques such as rhyme did not escape the Augustan's scrutiny. Dryden argued that rhyme is unnatural in drama because it does not accurately represent the spontaneous thoughts of the characters. (19) If drama truly mirrors life, then one could hardly expect characters to create whole stanzas of rhyming poetry on the spur of the moment. Dryden actually defended rhyme on the grounds that it is a device that makes repartee impressive. Nevertheless, the argument of the lifelikeness of rhyme indicates the depth to which the Augustans would probe in their quest to adapt drama to their social sensibilities.

Part of the Augustans' social sensibility was the reluctance to portray on stage many aspects of life.

Simple good manners precluded the presentation of life's coarser characteristics. Dryden explains that "'Tis true, some actions, though natural, are not fit to be represented; and broad obscenities in words ought in good manners to be avoided; expressions therefore are a modest cloathing of our thoughts, as Breeches and Petticoats are of our bodies." (20) Some aspects of life, the Augustans felt, could not be presented on stage because they could not be performed in an adequately lifelike fashion.

Death was not considered appropriate on stage because only an actual death would look natural and real enough to be fit for an audience. (21) Here we have the crux of an exceptionally thorny problem. Drama must mirror life exactly, yet some parts of life were too vulgar for the refined Augustan audience. In any event, some things such as death could not be realistically simulated anyway. The large volume of writings on the mimetic nature of drama attest to the preoccupation with this problem on the part of the authors of the age.

In addition to the notion of mimesis that the Augustans inherited from the Greeks, Aristotle's strict separation of tragedy and comedy haunted the eighteenth-century authors. Common sense dictates (so the argument ran) that tragedy and comedy were concepts so distinct and powerful that combining them could only



weaken them both. "Are not mirth and compassion things incompatible?" asks Dryden, "...and is it not evident that the poet must of necessity destroy the former by intermingling of the Latter?"(22) Consequently, many eighteenth-century playwrights devotedly fought to keep comedy out of tragedy and vice-versa.

Finally, as the ultimate goal of drama is to delight and instruct mankind, in Dryden's words, plays should properly instruct their audiences not only in manners and social conduct but in moral viewpoint as well. Virtue, always virtue, was the watchword. Dryden writes that plays should be "punishing Vice and rewarding Virtue."(23)

Imbued with the social consciousness of the age, remembering always Locke's dictums on impressions rather than inspiration, reviving Greek mimesis and Aristotelian dramatic precepts, adhering to the unities, juggling realism and decorum, and convinced of their beliefs, the Augustans faced Shakespeare. Shakespeare's eighteenth-century readers considered him with ambivalence. Vaguely aware that they were confronting a genius, but unwilling to concede brilliance to a man whose dramatic ideas were at such variance with their own, the Augustans both admired and belittled Shakespeare's style, and finally judged him to be an

author of occasional but sloppy genius.

Shakespeare's reputation in the eighteenth century was by no means as favorable and dogmatic as it is today. Although popular among his contemporaries, Shakespeare was criticised much more sharply by the Augustans. Shakespeare was not even the best writer of his age, according to the Augustans. As a playwright, Ben Jonson was admired more than Shakespeare.(24) Nevertheless, the popularity of Shakespeare's plays in the eighteenth century made necessary some amount of critical attention.

The Augustans felt that Shakespeare's greatest virtue was the lifelikeness of his drama. He met their highest criteria of the mimesis of art; in Johnson's words, Shakespeare's "drama is the mirror of life." (25) His plots are reasonable and believable, and must be the result of the study of "common conversation, and common occurrences." (26) What truly impressed the Augustans was the sheer ordinariness of Shakespeare's scenes. Johnson writes "Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion." (27) For the Augustans, to whom the best art reproduces life, Shakespeare's scenes epitomize sober dramatic reality.

The Augustan readers reveal their devotion to the

orderliness of societal organization in their criticism of Shakespeare's characters. In Johnson's opinion,

His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (28)

Johnson dismisses characters who are "too often individual[s]." He stresses "common humanity," "general passions and principles," and how "a species" helps "continue in motion" the "whole system of life." Johnson values the societal nature of Shakespeare's creation, not the evolution of the individual but rather the general movement of the larger scheme of humanity. Clearly, the Augustan preoccupation with the orderly mechanics of society colored their perception of Shakespeare's

character creation.

Shakespeare's Augustan readers were far less satisfied with his technique. Johnson condemns Shakespeare's style as "ungrammatical, perplexed, and obscure." (29) Generally, to Johnson and his contemporaries Shakespeare was a sloppy author who regularly violated eighteenth century standards of decorum and taste as well as literary conventions.

Nor were Johnson's contemporaries satisfied with Shakespeare's regular and blatant violation of the unities and other "common sense" dramatic rules. Dryden accuses Shakespeare of describing "so many Chronicles of Kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, cramp't into a representation of two hours and a half...this, instead of making a Play delightful, renders it ridiculous." (30) Johnson points out other alleged deficiencies. Shakespeare's plots are loose and careless; he maintains no "distinction of time or place:" his humor is unrefined: his tragedy has elements of "tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity," and is frequently "entangled with an unwieldy sentiment." His declamations are unnecessarily long and rambling, "cold and weak," his genius is easily quashed by "idle conceit, or contemptible equivocation." (31) In short, Shakespeare's drama was in structure and technique

totally unsuited to the Augustan Age of economy, wit, and precision.

Johnson does leap to Shakespeare's defense in a remarkable and influential rationalization of the Elizabethan's rejection of the unities. "The unities of time and place," Johnson declares, "are not essential to a just drama,...though they may sometimes conduce to pleasure, they are always to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction." (32) To Johnson, a play that conforms to the unities is interesting as a static curiosity, but is not good drama. In this instance at least Johnson's break with his contemporaries reveals the presentiments of a later age that rejects confining dramatic rules entirely. Johnson justifies Shakespeare's mixture of tragedy and comedy as complementary, instructive, and realistic. (33) History parallels Shakespeare's technique because it is chronological, but adheres to no set pattern of sobriety or humor. (34) Even more remarkably, Johnson turns criticism of Shakespeare's sloppy plot construction into a favorable characteristic. After all, he argues, Shakespeare's loose structures reflect the lack of order in his world. (35) Thus Shakespeare's unruly structure mimetically reproduces an unruly world.

What offended Johnson perhaps the most was

Shakespeare's failure to morally instruct his audience:

He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose...he makes no just distribution of good and evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their example to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate, for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place. (36)

This common thread of the "writer's duty" runs throughout the literature of the century. Social comedies always had a point. The wicked were always punished and the good uplifted, and the "moral purpose" always lay just under the surface of Augustan drama.

Shakespeare was a problem for the eighteenth century authors. He ignored the unities, wrote in a deplorable style, and neglected customary Augustan structural guidelines; nevertheless, he did ably recreate life.

"For the neo-classic critics, Shakespeare was an erratic genius whose plays were deficient in construction but who

was unexcelled in the creation of scenes of passion faithful to human nature in general and appropriate to the dramatic character." (37)

When the Augustans actually produced Shakespeare's plays, they confronted head-on their disagreements with his style, technique, and message. Shakespeare's plays continued to be popular, but the savants simply couldn't tolerate their substance. The answer to this dilemma was adaptation. The Augustans adapted numerous plays; indeed, four of the six most popular Shakespearean tragedies in the early eighteenth century were adaptations. (38) Nahum Tate's version of King Lear, which had a happy ending and eliminated the Fool, was the most widely performed adaptation, and held the stage for 157 years until 1838. We cannot underestimate the influence of these adaptations. Until the middle to late eighteenth century, when Shakespeare's romantic comedies gained popularity, the original texts began to be read again, and attacks on the adaptations started, the only productions of Shakespeare's popular tragedies to be seen were adaptations. These adaptations took the liberties of correcting Shakespeare's "faulty" language, restoring "balance" and generally cleaning up literature thought unsuitable for the supposedly refined and sophisticated Augustan audiences.

Of Shakespeare's six most popular tragedies in the early eighteenth century (Hamlet, Macbeth, Richard III, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and King Lear), all but Hamlet and Othello had been adapted with varying degrees of severity.(39) Of these, Nahum Tate's King Lear and Thomas Davenant's Macbeth exemplify the Augustans' attempts to improve Shakespeare. These two adaptations highlight the difficulties the adapters had with Shakespeare. As Christopher Spencer points out in the introduction to his book Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare, the Augustans' difficulties took three forms. The adapters did not understand or like Shakespeare's style, but they nevertheless attempted to imitate it.(40) In addition, the adapters felt obligated to correct disorders and incoherence. In addition to structure, the Augustans shaped Shakespeare's themes to their own sensibilities. The adapters were interested in making art a harmonious, consistent and coherent representation of the precise order and pattern of nature. However, King Lear is a story of disorder and confusion.(41) The adapters turn King Lear into an account of the structures of society. In Spencer's words, the adapted plays are "primarily social: they emphasize permanent patterns of human relationships with less attention to the depths of individual



experience."(42) Thematically, this emphasis manifests itself in two ways. First, characters serve not as individuals but as elements of plot unity and structure. Second, the Augustans are explicit rather than implicit in that insightful emotional implications are abandoned in favor of easily understood statements on the mechanics of relationships.(43) Finally, the Augustans turned Shakespeare's plays into vehicles for their own moral statements. A discussion of Tate's Lear and Davenant's Macbeth will bring all these points to light.

Nahum Tate's adaptation of King Lear stands out for two reasons: it held the stage for a very long time (a century and a half) and it took great liberties with the original text, notably eliminating the character of the Fool and having a happy ending. Throughout the play, though, Tate leaves the unmistakable stamp of Augustan sensibility.

In Tate's Lear, Cordelia refuses to answer Lear not out of love or fidelity to truth, but because to obey Lear means she will have to marry Burgundy.(44) Tate gives Cordelia and Edgar a secret love, lending balance to the relationships on stage at the expense of Cordelia's dramatic depth. The focus is shifted from the meaning and ramifications of love and duty and placed instead on familial relationships and structure. In a

similar sacrifice of credulity to balance, at the end of the play Goneril and Regan poison each other!(45) The simultaneous poisoning of Goneril and Regan lends symmetry to Tate's play, just as the love between Edgar and Cordelia creates a kind of emotional balance to the play as a whole. But Shakespeare's King Lear, a play about imbalance and discord, suffers from Tate's well-meant tampering.

Tate's explicitness weakens Shakespeare's imagery. For example, Regan's "sharp-toothed unkindness" becomes "ingratitude."(46) The vivid imagery of Lear's heart pierced by the adder's fang of a daughter's hatred is thrown out in favor of an explicit, but flat, noun. Shakespeare makes much of Gloucester's figurative loss of sight, and how it is linked to his physical loss of sight. Tate chooses instead to give Gloucester a windy soliloquy in which he laments not seeing "flow'ry Vales" and "distant Sunny Hills."(47) Tate captures the sentiment but not the passion.

The ending to Tate's version is the most striking departure from the original text. Not only is Tate's ending happy, but as a consequence the underlying theme of the play is irreparably altered. Cordelia's virtue and heroism save her, but it is her virtue that becomes the redeeming force in a play that makes virtue and moral

victory its core. As Edmund describes Cordelia, "O charming sorrow! how her Tears adorn her /Like Dew on Flow'rs, but she is Virtuous."(48) Tate's most significant thematic change is this negation of Shakespeare's vision of a blasted and hellish life in which "As flies to Wanton boys are we to th' gods, /They kill us for their sport."(49) Instead, his world is that of one of Cordelia's final lines: "Then there are Gods, and Vertue is their Care."(50)

Davenant's liberties taken with Macbeth are not as profound as Tate's with King Lear. Nevertheless, Davenant echoes many of the literary sentiments of his age. One of Davenant's major inclusions is the insertion of an extra scene (Act I, Sc v), in which Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff have a conversation which outlines Macduff's relationship to his wife. In this insertion Davenant manifests the Augustan concern with society and relationships.

Davenant emphasizes plot construction and explanation. Other additional scenes (such as Act II, Sc v) allow extra time for the witches (presumably for the entertainment of the audience) and more explanatory dialogue. The Porter and his humorous discussion of knocking on the door and drinking are replaced by a Servant who pompously declaims his only line, the not

terribly profound thought that "Labour by day causes rest at night." (51) Davenant neatly follows the unities and social decorum. Clearly, there is no place for a drunken comic character in a tragedy. In a final twist that parallels one of Tate's choices, Macduff's son is not killed. (52) Although Davenant does not exploit his characters' virtue as Tate does, Davenant does share Tate's reluctance to have a character die on stage. In a final capitulation to sensibility, Macbeth's sword, rather than head, is brought on stage at the conclusion. (53) These explicit deaths and acts of violence are essential to Shakespeare's story of a monstrous evil that takes horrible grasp of the Macbeths' souls. Davenant has no place for them in his version, which plays up ambition at the expense of evil, and jettisons haunting mystery in favor of flat explanatory dialogue.

Naturally, the audiences that demanded this kind of social drama eventually succumbed to the winds of change. We have seen that through the eighteenth century, audiences had changed because of the increasing numbers of both playhouses and theatergoers. The new theater audiences represented a broader cross-section of society and grew increasingly vocal in their demands for entertainment. Throughout most of the latter half of the

century, however, the magnitude and diversity of theater audiences remained fairly stable. By the turn of the nineteenth century, new changes began to influence the theater industry. These changes decisively shaped the course of English theater and created the environment in which the Romantic authors had to live and write.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the character of audiences once again shifted, reflecting a new pattern of attitudes towards the theater. Audiences increasingly assumed a more working-class aspect. The boxes and pit (where the aristocracy and middle class sat) were poorly attended. The galleries, which seated the lower classes, became full.(54) Consequently, as overall revenues dropped theater managers began to cut ticket prices.

Despite lower prices, the new audiences demanded further ticket price reductions. In 1809 when the large Covent Garden theater was rebuilt and reopened, 30% higher ticket prices sparked the 1809 price riots. Both rising prices and an increased number of private boxes angered the rioters; the riots culminated in "a series of nightly disturbances originating in the pit over a two-month period during which rioters shouted, blew catcalls, sounded rattles, jeered, danced, waved banners and battled the management's hired bruisers..."(55) The rioters eventually won and ticket prices again dropped.

Historians do not all agree on the causes for the changes in theater audiences of which rioting and other disturbances became characteristic. Michael R. Booth and others cite three probable contributing factors. One possible cause was the lateness of the dinner hour. As later dinner hours for the upper classes became widespread, evening theater patronage dropped off. The theater houses themselves became unsavory places. Not only would rioting offend a refined taste, but the public rooms outside auditoriums became gathering places for prostitutes. Finally, attending the theater had simply become unfashionable as more wealthy patrons became more interested in concerts and opera. (56)

In any case, the new audiences brought a new taste with them. In Booth's words,

With the influx of new audiences, the absence of the fashionable, the increase in population, the growing number of minor theaters playing the 'illegitimate' drama, and the huge size of the new patent theaters, the kinds of drama offered reflected changing patterns of taste. Melodrama, spectacle, farce, Shakespeare, verse tragedy, pantomime, light opera, sentimental comedy and the whole field of entr'acte entertainment--these were the main types of theatre in the first thirty

years of the nineteenth century, and they all had roots in the previous century. In most of these types there is little doubt of a coarsening of taste, of a new vulgarity, of the most obvious appeal to sensation and spectacle, of a greater delight in low comedy and outrageous costume.(57)

The word spectacle best describes the turn English drama took in the early 1800's. Not only did a coarsened audience demand cheap and vulgar entertainment, but "...technological developments in stage machinery trapdoors, sets, the controlled use of gas, limelight and stage fire, all contributed to a visual excitement, a mechanical ingenuity and a sense of theatrical effect not known on the English stage before or since."(58) Despite the supremacy of spectacle and the audience's thirst for "cock fighting, badger baiting, and bare-knuckle pugilism,"(59) as the nineteenth century wore on audiences became slightly more civilized as the pressures of the Romantic movement led them to perhaps the most popular and influential dramatic form of the century: melodrama.

Melodrama, a dramatic form which emphasizes flamboyant emotion and labyrinthine plot at the expense of character development, took hold. Melodrama was spectacle with a heart; it satisfied the audience's need

for "sensation, spectacle, violence, true love, romantic fantasy, strong narrative, fine sentiment, rhetoric, courage, low comedy, domestic realism, home and family, eccentric characters, patriotic spirit and a happy ending." (60) Authors of melodrama excited their audiences with bombastic and maudlin medieval tales of intrigue and Machiavellian deviousness set invariably in the wilds of Teutonic forests, eerie Bohemian highlands, or crumbling Rhenish castles.

Above all, melodrama provided the most popular dramatic manifestation of the Romantic ideals. Melodrama was how the Romantic movement found an outlet in post-Augustan drama. (61) Shakespeare's popularity continued undimmed, but his plays were presented melodramatically. (62) All dramatic form was subordinated to Romanticism and its dramatic manifestation, melodrama, the new drama the purpose of which "...was to explore that inner world of the psyche where the unfinished business of life is to be found--the wounds that have not been healed, the sorrows that have not been assuaged, the loves that have not been requited, the sense of having been used less than justly by life--and to offer the solace of chivalry, constancy and renunciation..." (63) The Romantic preoccupation with character, psyche, emotion, and personal exploration found its home in



melodrama.

One final characteristic of nineteenth century drama worth noting is the rise of the virtuoso actor-director. This phenomenon actually began with David Garrick in the middle of the eighteenth century and grew to produce the later giants of Edmund Kean, Philip Kemble, and Samuel Phelps, all men of phenomenal popularity who trod the boards in countless productions. What is significant about the virtuoso actor phenomenon is that it was at complete variance with the Shakespearean tradition of the virtuoso playwright. The playwright himself faded from preeminence as a host of acting giants emerged to entertain and control the theater world.

The rise of the virtuoso actor-director was just one of many factors that uniquely characterize the changing theater world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When the great Romantic poets turned to drama, they confronted a frustrating pattern of dramatic problems that were themselves the result of centuries of theatrical evolution. This pattern decisively influenced the Romantic poets' attempts at writing drama, and made their ultimate success as a group impossible.

Audiences had changed inexorably from the sedate court members of the Restoration era through the demanding and increasingly violent middle- and

lower-class Augustan citizens to the crowds of fluttering hearts enthusiastically devouring the bombastic emotionalism of melodrama. The Romantics were surrounded by theater audiences whose taste was one of simplistic entertainment. The tragic form was eclipsed in the Augustan Age by social comedy and in the Romantic era by pseudo-tragic melodrama. Finally, the virtuoso actor emerged as the controlling force in theater as pompous spectacle became more important than solid play writing. As we shall see, the complex matrix of the historical dramatic continuum, combined with the ideals and self-consciousness of Romanticism and the Romantic idolization of Shakespeare, prevented a successful Romantic solution to the dilemma of Romantic drama.

### Chapter Three: Romanticism and the Constraints of New Liberty

In the previous chapter, I described the system of historical attitudes, theatrical traditions, and developments in drama that would have such an impact on the great Romantic poets when they turned to writing drama. The attitudes of the Romantics themselves provided the other restraints on creativity that hindered their dramatic efforts. In order to understand this other pattern of restraints we must first examine the nature of the Romantic revolt, then Romantic attitudes toward art, theater, and Shakespeare, the peculiar Romantic notion of self-consciousness, and finally the heritage of both the figure and the work of Faust.

As Jacques Barzun explains in his book The Energies of Art, the two most important movements of the last half-millennium were the Protestant Reformation, and the political, industrial, and psychological revolution we call Romanticism--a revolution that shook the foundations of Western thought and whose effects can still be felt today.(1) So fundamental was this revolution and so lasting are its effects that in many ways we are still in the Romantic era, as our own literature and art echoes that of the nineteenth century. What we call

Romanticism, or at least Romantic literature, is the literary manifestation of a movement that altered not only art but all of society and its patterns of thought as well. Romanticism, which "emphasizes imagination, emotion, and introspection, and often celebrates nature, the common man, and freedom of the spirit," was a clean break with the traditions of the past, and it was fueled by intense societal changes.(2) The Industrial Revolution, the rise of the middle class, the French and American Revolutions, and the awakening of nationalism all contributed to the changes in society that the Romantic literature represents.

The preoccupation with nature emerges as one of the hallmarks of the new Romantic thought. Unlike the Augustans, who thrived in a city environment, the Romantics rejected the noxious bustle of the Industrial Age cities and looked to the countryside for relief. The Nature of Wordsworth's "Lines composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" leads man "from joy to joy," and helps him to forget the "dreary intercourse of daily life."(3) In a world of ever-increasing population and activity, Nature provided a refuge for a weary heart, a solitude for a restless mind. The love of nature as an escape gradually evolved into a longing not only for the peace of the countryside but the supposed perfection of the

ideal of Nature. Nature turned into a mute but powerful force, an ideal refuge that thankfully was not judgmental or self-critical but simply was.

Nature the living ideal was born. Nature was "alive, an organism, not a machine." (4) In Barzun's words,

The difference again marks off the two eras of Western thought--the Classical, in which physics and mathematics are the models of thought; and the Romantic, in which biological forms and their evolution furnish the model. In the one, the effort was to reduce all observations to a simple base and unchanging diagram in the spirit of geometry; in the other, the effort was to recapture by insight and intuition the movements of ever-changing life. (5)

As Barzun points out, the new attitude toward nature is merely an indication of a larger movement of thought, a movement which rejects the vacuous Augustan mathematical constructs of human relationships in favor of a robust and intuitive awareness of the world. Barzun continues that "introspective minds have known that life is an element which defies analysis, while at the same time it seems compounded of opposites. It cannot, therefore, be talked about in geometrical propositions but only in

poetic ones--parable, allegory, myth, art."(6) For the Romantics, the new poetry of nature and intuition liberated the modern mind from the fetters of Augustan concern for precision, symmetry, balance, and a near-geometrical sense of analysis.

Their liberation was not complete, however. As the Romantics turned to nature for inspiration and escape, they realized that the bonds of society still chained them. Though the patterns of social behavior were changing, the Romantics were caught fast in the grip of nationalism, democracy, and industrialization. As nature represented an escape, they began to see society as a foe to be overcome. The Romantics shared the "common emotion, that of nineteenth-century man who, no sooner freed by enlightenment and revolution, found himself locked in a life-and-death struggle with the democratic nation-state and industrial society."(7) The new social order still imposed unacceptable demands on the freshly liberated Romantic ideal. Social conventions still divided yearning hearts. Business and industry cheapened the human spirit. Society was tantamount to a raison d'etre to the Augustans. For the Romantics, society led to alienation rather than identity.(8)

The peculiar set of circumstances the Romantics faced and the "life-and-death struggle" in which their

spirits were locked colored their interpretation of art and drama and their perception of Shakespeare and his plays. Ultimately, these factors combined to form a problem--the problem of creativity and self-consciousness, and the struggle of personal imagination and emulation of Shakespeare. This problem made spontaneous dramatic creation a task of monumental difficulty. The "Romantic problem" took decades to coalesce. In fact, as D. Nichol Smith contends in the preface to his book Eighteenth Century Essays of Shakespeare, the period 1750-75, and not 1800-1825, was the initial period of change in Shakespearean (and, in a broader sense, dramatic) criticism. Critics such as Joseph Warton, Lord Kames, and Maurice Morgann were the first to express sentiments which became the core of Romantic criticism of drama. Maurice Morgann can especially be acknowledged as the true but unrecognized forerunner of the later but better-known Romantic critics.(9)

In his volume of Shakespearean criticism, Morgann expresses a number of opinions that would eventually become central to Romantic notions of drama. In some ways, such as his ambivalent attitude toward Shakespeare's work, Morgann is still a product of the Augustan Age. Morgann shares the Augustan perception of

Shakespeare as a flawed genius. "It must be a strange art in Shakespeare," he remarks, "which can draw our liking and good will towards so offensive an object." (10) But some of his other ideas clearly indicate a fundamental change in emphasis with regard to dramatic interpretation. The first is the Romantic concern for the poet himself and the characters he creates. Morgann asks, "For what is Falstaff, what Lear, what Hamlet, what Othello, but different modifications of Shakespeare's thought?" (11) Already we can trace the emerging pattern of an intuitive identity between the playwright's mind and the products of his imagination--his characters. Morgann also breaks with tradition in his rejection of dramatic laws and his embracing of the idea that inspiration is not the result of external stimulation but rather the product of a mysterious inner passion. In Morgann's words,

Poetry delights in surprize, conceals her steps, seizes at once upon the heart, and obtains the Sublime of things betraying the sounds of her ascent: True Poesy is magic...an effect from causes hidden or unknown. To the Magician I prescribed no laws... (12)

Through the awakening study of character creation, the curiosity to know the inner workings of the playwright's



mind, the rejection of the previously sacrosanct dramatic laws, and the discussion of the internal magic of inspiration, Maurice Morgann presages the work of the Romantics in the following century.

By the first decade of the nineteenth century the new Romantic ideals found their way into the literature of the period. The preoccupation with nature led the Romantic authors to consider the outdoors rather than the noxious atmosphere of the city as the setting for their literature. In the Preface to his Lyrical Ballads, published in 1800, Wordsworth writes that poetry should be the recreation of the simple events of ordinary life, with the intent to trace in them "the primary laws of nature." Rustic life more easily reveals "the essential passions of the heart." Simple, unadorned language more accurately presents the genuine attitudes and passions of ordinary people.(13)

Concomitant with their movement away from society and the city life into the country, the Romantics began to examine characters in isolation. As society diminished in importance, more and more attention was paid to the study of the individual and its motivation. Thus what became known as character criticism was born. Dramatic considerations of plot, pacing, and dramatic unity and tension were discarded as the Romantics turned

to evaluating characters in terms of internalization of activity, psychological motivation, and intensity of personal passion. Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in the Romantic attitudes towards Shakespeare and his plays.

For the first time, critics devoted considerable thought to the playwright's role in the creation of his work. Critics began to see the inner dimension of the playwright's efforts. As Wordsworth writes, works "to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply"(14) (my emphasis). Breaking with the Lockean tradition of knowledge through external sensation, the Romantics explored the notion of an internal inspiration found through reflection. In a startling thought that precedes the Romantic era by a century and a half, but sums up the Romantic attitude neatly, John Dryden remarked that Shakespeare "looked inward for nature, and found her there."(15)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge shared Wordsworth's interest in the internal aspect of creativity. In his examination of the sources of inspiration, Coleridge defined a "primary" and a "secondary" imagination. By "primary imagination" Coleridge describes the concept of a power

of human perception--that it is a living "repetition in the finite mind of an eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."(16) This idea of a repetition within the author of an external source of creative impetus is strongly reminiscent of Locke's interior-exterior relationship exemplified by the tabula rasa.

Fundamentally, however, Coleridge's description differs greatly from Locke's in that Locke regards the human brain as a blank slate incapable of activity, whereas Coleridge describes an active process of reproduction. Coleridge's "secondary imagination" is "an echo of the former" (primary imagination). It "coexists with the conscious will," disassembling and reconstructing the ideas presented by the primary imagination. In an ongoing process, the secondary imagination "struggles to idealize and to unify."(17) Most importantly, this process is dynamic, creative, and internal.

Not only did the Romantics begin to evaluate Shakespeare as a playwright in terms of motivation, inspiration, and imagination, but they cast the same scrutiny on the dramatic character as an individual. For the Augustans, in Samuel Johnson's words, "Shakespeare has no heroes."(18) The Romantics believed that Shakespeare's greatest strength were his heroes, and they devoted their attention accordingly. The finest example

of this attention is the extensive study the Romantics gave of Hamlet. As the contemporary author John Crawford points out, "the vital heart of this tragedy [Hamlet] is not an idea, not a social revolution, not a political intrigue but Hamlet as an individual." (19) The importance of Hamlet as one of a number of interrelated stage characters diminishes as

Romantics tend to adopt the same basic point of view that Hamlet should be viewed as an individual in an intuitive and psychological way without regard to the close confinement of the character on stage, i.e., as a person, not simply as a persona... (20)

As a consequence of their study of Hamlet as an individual, the Romantics asked themselves three questions--1) Is Hamlet a madman, or is he merely melancholic? 2) Is Hamlet a study in psychology, revenge, passion, grief, or character conflict? 3) Why does Hamlet delay in acting on the knowledge of the treachery of the King and Queen? (21)

A number of critics focus their attention on this last question. The answers they propound reveal the Romantic concern with reflection and inner tensions. Edward Dowden, Edouard Sievers, A. C. Bradley, J. M. Murray, Peter Alexander, Max Plowman, and Donald Stauffer

all believe that Hamlet is too reflective to sustain the moral shock of events.(22) Hazlitt feels that Hamlet is the victim of his own rationalization--Hamlet's lapses into reflection render him incapable of action.(23)

Coleridge joins these critics in perceiving a Hamlet that withdraws from action into reflection. Hamlet behaves without firm attachment and interest in the external world, but only as it causes images in his own mind. Coleridge elaborates that

[Shakespeare]...intended to portray a person in whose view the external world and all its incidents and objects were comparatively dim and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind. Hamlet beheld external things in the same way that a man of vivid imagination, who shuts his eyes, sees what has previously made an impression on his organs.(24)

In one sense this view of a withdrawn and reflective Hamlet reproduces in one man the characteristics of the Romantic movement. Just as Hamlet withdraws from society, so do the Romantics. They share his lapses into reflection, and his detachment from the outside world. Both Hamlet and the Romantics struggle in the hothouse atmosphere of an all-consuming awareness of self. Hamlet

carries to an extreme the Romantics' withdrawal from society, rejection of the ideology of external inspiration, and the search for self manifested by a vivid and reflective imagination.

Another interpretation of Hamlet that surfaces in the Romantic period is that of the Hamlet of inadequacy. Goethe feels that Hamlet's tragedy is his inability to bear the burden of greatness and great action on an unfit soul.(25) William Richardson concludes that Hamlet failed to kill the King because Hamlet was irresolute. He also claims that the text (i.e. Hamlet's professed excuse) is wrong. Furthermore, Richardson chimes in with Goethe in condemning a "Hamlet unable to bear the burden of the task." (26) In short, the Romantics turn Hamlet "into a hero of hesitation." (27) Perhaps, in some psychologically obscure way, the great Romantic poets like Goethe saw in themselves the irresolute Hamlet they describe, and sensed their own inability as they struggled with the genius of Shakespeare.

The Romantics' approach to Hamlet encapsulates their approach to all drama. Another Romantic critic expresses the sentiment that "Hamlet's difficulties increase his misery, but...they also increase his moral and spiritual greatness." (28) Hamlet's intriguing appeal is his plight, the moral dilemma of activity and reflection,

moral imperative and inadequacy. Thus Hamlet takes on the qualities of the oppressed hero, caught in a web of events and paralyzed by his consciousness. As the Romantics turn their gaze more steadily on the person of Hamlet, they begin to ignore the other, equally crucial aspects of Hamlet the play: plot and structure; theme, style, and tone; and, most importantly, the relationships between characters that make a play more than a single character study. In a larger sense, then, the example of Hamlet and the Romantics represents the system of values with which the Romantics evaluated drama--not as an arena of tension between characters, but the juxtaposition of discrete souls.

We can sense in the movement from plot analysis towards character study an underlying movement away from practical theater to dramatic literature. This larger movement had very far-reaching effects on the Romantic efforts to write drama. In the first chapter I made the distinction between theater and drama; as the Romantics withdrew from society and turned inward, the interest in the theatrical aspect of drama waned. The truly great English playwrights of the past were men of the theater. Shakespeare, as I explained earlier, was involved in all facets of theater production. To name another example, George Bernard Shaw was a devoted and industrious member

of the theater business. The great Romantic poets--Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge--all withdrew from the theater in their misguided pursuit of drama. I say "misguided" because, as we shall see shortly, the abandonment of theater was to have considerable impact on their attempts to write drama.

The Romantics were not men of the theater. For various reasons, each of the great poets eventually shunned theaters and their unruly audiences. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, nineteenth-century theaters played to riotous audiences who readily and obnoxiously declared their views during performances and harbored an unquenchable thirst for cheaply emotional melodrama. The virtuoso actors led a rabble of performers whose style became more and more flamboyant and exaggerated. Consequently, Lamb, Coleridge, and Shelley rarely attended the theater.(29) Byron feared the incompetent judgments of an unappreciative audience.(30) All these men sensed the divergence between their own tastes and that of the theatergoers. Just as they turned away from the city life to the country, the Romantics lost touch with the link between drama and theater. Lamb and others felt Shakespeare was fit only for reading, not for actually producing. Lamb



declared flatly that the character of Lear cannot be acted on stage.(31) Hazlitt felt that Hamlet was simply unsuited for performance.(32) The Romantic poets-turned-playwrights then began writing "closet dramas"--drama divorced from theater and intended for private reading only. According to legend, Giuseppe Verdi is said to have once remarked that if you want to know how successful your work is, keep an eye on the box office. This notion would have been completely foreign to the Romantics as they turned their backs on the theater industry, audiences, and ultimately, society.

Though they turned their backs on the theater, the Romantics shared an intense interest in Shakespeare. But while the Augustans only grudgingly praised Shakespeare, the Romantics elevated him to near godhood. The Romantics praised Shakespeare's genius, probed his creations, and looked to him as their model. They sensed the power and wonder of the Shakespearean era and sought to recapture it, but they always saw Shakespeare through the lens of the Romantic ideals.

The Romantic interest in Shakespeare has been described as having been "partly motivated by an intense desire to recover a lost order."(33) They sought to discover the secret of Shakespeare's success and revitalize the decayed English theater through drama of

genuine force and meaning. According to Neo-classic theory and doctrine, Shakespeare was a problem because his plays did not fit several popular molds. To the Romantics, Shakespeare's works were wonderful and meaningful embodiments of artistic perfection.(34)

According to Jacques Barzun, "Goethe, Stendhal, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Keats, loved and deified Shakespeare because they found in him an artistic liberator and standard-bearer."(35) In their battle to praise Shakespeare, what astonished the Romantics most was Shakespeare's sheer strength and constancy of creation--he represented an awesome "force of nature."(36) What exactly caused this remarkable fecundity was a little harder for the Romantics to identify--after all, it all seemed to take place so effortlessly:

...what defies analysis is not the effect but the contriving of the cause. The effect is moving because we are all moved by irrelevance-in-continuity during moments of tension that others around us do not share. But which words, subjects, cadences will in a fiction grip us in just this way cannot be reduced to rules. Hence the attribution to Shakespeare of extraordinary mastery, for he can produce this and

countless other effects without visible effort,  
without a rational operation of the mind.(37)

Naturally, a man of such recognizable yet inexplicable  
brilliance could only be a genius of the greatest  
magnitude. Hence, "Shakespeare to...[the  
Romantics]...becomes the infallible and godlike  
creator..."(38)

But the Romantics insisted on interpreting  
Shakespeare in Romantic terms. This "infallible and  
godlike creator" told stories of "...characters living in  
a world of the imagination that operates by its own  
internal laws."(39) Significantly, this aspect of  
Shakespeare's genius also manifests the Romantic  
awareness of character, intense interest in the world of  
the imagination, and the rejection of external  
constraints. Consistent with their disinterest in the  
Augustan principles of social interaction on stage, the  
Romantics increasingly saw Shakespeare as a creator of  
characters rather than a dramatist.(40) Plot structure  
was unimportant to them--they were far more interested in  
characterization and the beauty of Shakespeare's  
poetry.(41) As the Romantics insisted on seeing the  
struggles of human characters in isolation, they  
recognized that passion and desire are the predominant  
tragic traits. If Shakespearean tragedy is concerned

with the story of the hero and his death, then tragedy is the result of the hero's deeds.(42) Again the evaluation of drama leads to the rejection of society and the critical awareness of self. Whenever Shakespeare was read rather than performed, the reaction fueled the opinion that Shakespeare was better read than acted. In Germany, where Romanticism started, Germans were familiar with Shakespeare through books rather than stage productions; they tended to be even more sympathetic towards Shakespeare.(43) Finally, the Romantics preferred to see Shakespeare's craft as descriptions of internalized tension. Coleridge calls The Tempest a "Romantic drama" because it is completely divorced from historical and geographical reality, and becomes a sheltering arena for the full play of human passions.(44) In short, the Romantics deified Shakespeare, sought inspiration from his genius, yet insisted on approaching him on their own terms.

Although they occasionally denied it, the Romantics tried to recreate Shakespeare's genius through imitation. But imitation is a dangerous thing. As Dryden writes,

I take imitation of an author to be an endeavour of a later poet to write like one who has written before him, on the same subject; that is, not to translate his words, or to be confined to his

sense, but only to set him as a pattern, and to write, as he supposes that author would have done, had he lived in our age, and in our country.(45)

The danger lies in the attempt "to write like one who has written before him." If Shakespeare really was such an incomparable genius, a near-deity, then how could anyone truly imitate him? The Romantics could not help but feel inadequate when compared to their idol, Shakespeare. This sense of inadequacy combined with the Romantic preoccupation with the inner workings of character and playwright to produce perhaps the most debilitating influence on Romantic playwriting: self-consciousness.

Self-consciousness, or the critical awareness of self, was at once the touchstone and chimera of the Romantic intellectual movement. In part a source of inspiration, "The act of self-consciousness is for us [writes Coleridge] the source and principle of all our knowledge."(46) According to Goethe, self-consciousness leads to an understanding of others. "The highest achievement possible to a man is the full consciousness of his own feelings and thought, for this gives him the means of knowing intimately the hearts of others."(47) In exchange for these benefits, however, self-consciousness exacts a terrible price. Central to Coleridge's philosophy of awareness of self is the

resolution, in the words of John Crawford, that "Self-consciousness, in which subject and object are identical, must dissolve the identity to become conscious of it." (48) In the final analysis, self-consciousness calls for the destruction of self. Thus self-consciousness can lead only to isolation, alienation, and finally despair. (49)

Byron's narrative and partly autobiographical poem Childe Harold's Pilgrimage provides a particularly apt example of the destructive pattern of self-consciousness. By creating a character like Childe Harold and endowing him with profound artistic life, the poet fades in importance but not in self-consciousness. Byron writes that

'Tis to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now--  
What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,  
Soul of my thought... (50)

Byron sets up a heartbreaking tension between a poet inescapably aware of self, and trying to escape self by creating "a being more intense."

In a larger sense, Childe Harold can be considered to be Hamlet without the plays around him. Both Hamlet

and and Childe Harold indulge themselves in flights of self-critical fancy and reflection. But Harold has no interest in the common crowd. He exists only to serve his brooding introspective spirit. Harold rejects mankind, and in so doing, escapes to nature. He, and the Byron he represents, finally immerse themselves in destructive self-consciousness. In Byron's words,

...I have thought  
 Too long and darkly, till my brain became,  
 In its own eddy boiling and overwrought,  
 A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame:  
 And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame,  
 My springs of life were poisoned.(51)

Self-consciousness thus launches the Romantic mind into an accelerating spiral of destruction: as the Romantics turn inward, their awareness of self becomes an unblinking critical scrutiny that leads ultimately to the rejection of self.

If we want to trace the roots of Romantic ideals like self-consciousness, we must look beyond "Childe Harold" to much earlier works--in fact, all the way back to Goethe's Faust. The issues Goethe faced through Faust capture the essence of the intellectual revolution that Romanticism represents. The Romantics realized the importance of Faust and the play was widely felt to be

what Jacques Barzun terms "as epitome of the modern age." (52) As a stageplay Faust is hopeless, but as literature it powerfully influenced the attitudes of the Romantics and can be said to have shaped the Romantic movement itself. As Barzun points out, Faust does not at first seem to be a radically new re-examination of those forces of human nature which bind men together and motivate the momentous changes that characterize the developments of mankind. The plot of Faust seems dated and obscure, Goethe's language is rambling, his style lacks unity, large portions of Faust are morally convoluted and intellectually treacherous, and because of all this Faust is completely unstageable. While Faust has been produced in Germany many times, its popularity as a stageplay does not extend outside the author's homeland. Faust wrestles with the issues of modernity, and in his struggle are the seeds which, with the dawning of Romanticism, will blossom into the bitter fruit of awareness and longing.

The dates that mark when Goethe wrote Faust (roughly 1750 to 1830) span the time of change between the Augustan and Romantic Ages. Goethe felt that the maelstrom of change offered the finest opportunity for a lasting achievement of Romanticism: the fusion of universal themes. Goethe writes that Shakespeare



achieved the fusion of the old and new, despite the seeming inconsistency of that fusion. The Romantics, he feels, must try to recreate that miracle.(53) Goethe obviously bore this fusion in his mind when he composed Faust. In Part II, in a series of passages that invite considerable critical attention, Faust (who represents Romanticism) weds Helen (representing classicism) and the two bear Euphorion, the "harmonious modern" who apparently stood for Byron in Goethe's symbology of personages. Thematically Faust's importance depends on fusion; Barzun explains that:

The work would have failed of its effect had the doctrine been couched in the rhetoric of neo-classic art. The new grandeur must on the contrary spring from extreme contrasts--Mephisto's mocking doggerel and Faust's apostrophes to Nature; Gretchen's sweetness and the obscenities of the witches Sabbath; the intellectual doubts of Faust and the small-town gossip that moves Martha, Valentine, and Gretchen's companions. It may indeed be said that the great artistic innovation in Faust is its willing vulgarity. For the first time since Shakespeare, a work of high intention took account of the low and small and commonplace.

(54)

The very incongruities that can initially repel the reader make possible the fusion of all the psychological and moral attitudes necessary for the expression of modern thought. To be "a true representation of the world..." a play "...must fuse thought, passion, and humour."(55) The necessity of uniting the disparate elements of the human experience explains Goethe's sweeping portrayal of the range of human effort.

What thematically unites the different parts of Faust's human efforts is his frustration at realizing his own humanity. He comes to the realization that man is both wretched and great. "He is wretched because he is a limited, mortal creature; his is great because his mind embraces the whole universe and, coming to feel apart from it, knows its own wretchedness."(56) The duality of the human struggle, the awareness of the mortal limitations on a yearning spirit, torments Faust and would haunt later Romantics. The infatuation with nature was an attempt to escape these limitations. According to Barzun, "What launched Faust on his career was dissatisfaction with conventional knowledge, whose falsehood and futility made the whole apparatus of society that rested upon it a disgusting sham. Nature then appeared as the only test of what was real."(57) But Nature could not speak to the individual soul; for

all of its power to soothe and inspire, man and Nature could not touch minds and share reality in the way that men could within the structure of society. Man could only be alone; how could man help but be shattered by self-revelation and a desire that grew limitless in the face of a sharply limited ability to achieve?

Faust's life divides itself neatly into two parts. In the first part, before the action of the play, the bookish lore of the stale world has "withered his heart." Faust is cut off from "the grand and dark forces of Nature and holds life worthless." In the second part, made possible by his compact with Mephistopheles, Faust is reunited with Nature. But his voyage to the heart of Nature and the heights and valleys of emotion blind him until the end to the fact that "he is not alone in the universe." (58) Once again we have traveled the full circle from a rejection of stale and decadent society, through the escape to Nature and the resulting awareness of self, to the crushing knowledge that man's limitations and desires are so widely and irrevocably separated, finally to the despair of being mortal.

The one thing Faust gains is the "erotic principle"--the "disposition to love, accept, feel with--in contrast to the attitude that rejects, denies, scorns, and hates." (59) The play peaks with the bizarre

arrival of the Eternal Feminine--the embodiment of the erotic principle. It is not the profoundly strange ending, however, that endures and shapes the Romantic movement most clearly. Goethe's themes that I have described would surface in later Romantic works--such was Faust's power to shape and define Romanticism. The desire to fuse old and new to synthesize a worthy successor to Shakespeare, the attempted escape to Nature, and the destructive spiral of self-awareness and despair are all ideas which we will see reappear in the works of the great Romantic poets. The figure of Faust is thus the representation in one character of the Romantic ideal--the Romantics would all carry the Faust figure within them as they wrestled with Nature, identity, and awareness.

The Romantic revolution released thinkers and writers from the fetters of Augustan society consciousness, and plunged them into the maelstrom of conflicting desire and limitations that characterize and define the nature of the Romantic movement. A number of patterns emerge that delineate the new attitudes among the Romantics toward art and theater. Through their literature, they expressed the newly found products of Romantic thought: Nature as a subject, the internalization of activity, the development of character

at the expense of plot, the intense interest in the imagination and psychology of the hero, and a dramatic study divorced from a theatrical reality.

Equally important developments include the rise of character criticism and the closet drama. These events and the decline of interest on the part of the Romantics to attend theater and be a part of the theater experience, combined with the idolization of Shakespeare, would all have crucial impact on the development of Romantic drama.

Far and away the most startling and original creation of the new Romantic outlook, self-consciousness changed forever the way man thought of himself and his relationship to the universe. Liberated from the Great Chain of Being, freed from the oppressive bonds of Augustan society, the Romantics had no choice but to confront the final limit to their creativity--their own spirits. Goethe's Faust embraces the heart of self-awareness and critical self-judgment, leaving a heritage with which the later Romantics would have to contend.

This vast pattern of novel and extreme changes in attitudes and consciousness which rise, Kraken-like, into the turbulent waters of early Romanticism, constitutes a formidable ideological backdrop against which the

Romantics would project their dramatic attempts. We have already seen one set of influencing factors--the developments in the theater and society, the environment within which the Romantics would live. Now we have seen the patterns of self-exploration that provide the mental context from which the Romantics would create.

#### Chapter Four: The Struggle

The great Romantic poets wrote mystifyingly bad drama. They composed poetry that has stood the test of time, and they idolized Shakespeare and sought to recreate his success. Despite their poetic achievements and fascination with Shakespeare, the Romantics met only failure when they turned to drama. They certainly tried hard; among the major poets who wrote drama (Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Wordsworth) over a dozen plays, dramatic poems, or fragments were eventually published, yet most are either unknown today or are studied as freaks of literature. Most justly deserve their present obscurity. All these plays represent attempted solutions to a problem that consisted of a set of circumstances and constraints which prevented the Romantics from producing successful drama. The problem under which the Romantics labored takes the form of two sets of factors: external constraints imposed by the societal and theatrical environment in which the Romantics wrote, and internal dictates fundamental to the Romantic movement.

The external constraints that stymied the Romantics' dramatic efforts were the results of two centuries of change in both the theater and society in general. The

nineteenth century theater industry offended and discouraged the Romantics, driving them from the playhouses and forcing them to lose touch with the vital link between drama and the theater. Drama unfit for the stage was the consequence.

Audiences changed over the course of the 1700's to the point that by the turn of the nineteenth century, unruly and demanding mobs filled the theaters. Shakespeare and his contemporaries immersed themselves in the theater industry and consequently knew instinctively what an audience would like. The Romantics, attempting to revitalize the English stage by writing serious works of dramatic importance, turned away from organized theater as they watched their masterpieces fail dismally before audiences who preferred the cheap amusement of melodrama. As a result, they ignored the practical aspects of playwriting and producing. What little drama the Romantics did see performed was all melodrama: flamboyant and florid tirades thinly disguised as bombastic spectacle. The Romantics' own plays suffered. Without a purpose, they were pointless; without criteria, they had no significance; without an audience, they appealed to no one. Romantic drama, unsurprisingly, is boring, flat, uninspiring, and unstageable.

These external constraints are fairly self-evident.



Less obvious and requiring more scrutiny are internal factors inherent in the attitudes of the Romantics. Romanticism is based on several fundamental concepts which are unfortunately incompatible with good drama and effectively frustrated the efforts of the great poets.

Self-consciousness severely inhibited the Romantics' creativity. A number of influences brought about the awareness of self that both inspired and debilitated the Romantics. The new independence of spirit that was a natural consequence of the liberating forces within the French, American, and Industrial Revolutions and the rise of nationalism broke the iron bonds of class society and turned the authors' attention away from the dynamics of the group and to the stresses of the individual. A wholly new field for exploration opened--the human mind and spirit in isolation, in contrast to the Augustan study of characters within a framework of human interaction. Drama is about characters, but more importantly it is about characters in interaction. As the Romantics rejected society and turned increasingly to the examination of individuals, their drama became less a study of characters in relationships and more a study of character in isolation--which does not (generally speaking) make for interesting drama. The rejection of society led to the study of character and the analysis of

self.

The idolization of Shakespeare and the study of self led surreptitiously but inexorably to crippling self-awareness. The Romantics knew they wanted to revitalize the English stage, and they turned to Shakespeare as their model. Realizing that they were taking up the mantle of the greatest English playwright, and unsure of their abilities to write good drama, the Romantics suffered an overwhelming and awkward self-consciousness that guaranteed the failure of their efforts.

The drama of the Romantics suffered intensely from the twin burdens of self-consciousness and the rejection of society. Their plays lack all dramatic tension as dynamic relationships between characters degenerate into the pedantic posturing of characters who share the same stage but do not genuinely interact. Theater does not dwell in the realms of pure imagination; it requires social order and relationships between characters. The Romantics generated visions of characters in isolation dealing with the stresses within their souls, but their very rejection of social order meant that no audience would ever sit through a production of the Romantics' interminable static monologues which passed as "drama."

Self-consciousness ensured their failure because

playwriting and self-consciousness simply don't mix. One of the curious aspects of Shakespeare is that we know so little about his personal feelings and opinions--his plays reveal practically nothing of the man. The Romantic plays, on the other hand, are virtually maps into the minds of the authors. My discussion of Hamlet in the preceding chapter demonstrates that self-consciousness permeated even the Romantic perception of Shakespeare. But Shakespeare's drama worked, and that of the Romantics didn't.

The Romantics shied away from comedy. All of their plays are tragedies. The reason for this is that in their attempts to improve English drama the Romantics felt that serious plays would be their most appropriate vehicle. Comedy (or satire) requires distance--a distance that permits objective observation of the foibles of mankind. The Romantics were so wrapped up in themselves and took themselves so seriously that such a distance and objectivity was out of the question. So was reality--Byron wrote in his journal in November of 1813, "I began a comedy, but burnt it because the scene ran into reality--a novel for the same reason. In rhyme [that is, poetry] I can keep away from facts."(1) But drama is about reality--exotic perhaps, and often disturbing--but about reality nonetheless.

Romantic drama failed for two reasons. First, a series of external constraints drove the Romantics away from the only yardstick of success--the theater. Rowdy, demanding, and often crude audiences made the theater industry anathema to the Romantics. Bereft of the practical experience necessary to good playwriting, the Romantics churned out lifeless, interminable works that were technically flabby and dismal entertainment. The second reason was a set of internal factors--the self-consciousness and rejection of society fundamental to the Romantic movement. The idolization of Shakespeare and the study of self led to a self-consciousness in complete and utter discord with the objective distance required to write good drama. These two reasons and the elemental changes in philosophy, society, and theater industry of which they are the apex virtually ensured the failure of the Romantics by constructing a seemingly unsolvable problem.

There were essentially two main types of drama during the Romantic Age: popular melodrama and the experimental dramas of the major poets.(2) Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron all tried to find a solution to the problem of Romantic drama. Their efforts met with little success. Coleridge's Remorse, probably the most well-received, ran for only twenty

performances. Shelley's The Cenci had to wait until 1886 for a private showing because of the incest theme.(3) Most of the other plays were either never performed or led extremely short stage lives. Nonetheless, they represent a variety of attempts at producing good English drama, and deserve individual examination.

John Keats's play Otho the Great typifies the least successful variant of Romantic drama. Written in 1819, Otho the Great was never publicly performed. It was the least successful type of Romantic drama in that it was patterned after typical melodramas of the age, but was not even very well written. Otho the Great, set in medieval Hungary, tells the story of the noble hero Prince Ludolph set to avenge the conspiracy of the villainous Conrad and Aurenthe. The murky plot centers around Ludolph's love for the treacherous Aurenthe. Keats awkwardly constrains himself with his time frame. Committed to squeezing all of the action into one day, Keats condemns his play to having a plot which consists of a situation being uncovered bit by bit, rather than a situation being developed as the play progresses. Consequently, relationships are never fully developed and most of the first act is spent revealing the plot gradually. Unfortunately, the action on stage is so flat and uninviting that the tedious exterior effectively

quashes any interest in the underlying story.

Keats's characters are wooden and unnatural; their relationships are unconvincing. Ludolph's abrupt and complete conversion in Act IV is a good example. When Gersa implies to Ludolph that Aurenthe, his betrothed, has betrayed him, Ludolph turns on Gersa wrathfully: "Thou liest! thou amazest me beyond /All scope of thought; convulsest my heart's blood /To deadly churning...Why shouldst join-- /Tell me, the league of Devils?"(4) A scant three pages later, when a page brings word that Aurenthe is not in her chambers, Ludolph explodes, "So, at last, /This nail is in my temples!"(5) His conversion is as laughable as it is complete. Swearing vengeance on the former apple of his eye, Ludolph orders, "Burn--burn the witch!"(6) But Ludolph's silliness is not unique. The Abbot's and Erminia's condemnation of Aurenthe and Conrad is a contrived plot device. Likewise, Keats engineers a forced and unconvincing ending--two-thirds of the main characters wind up dead in the last act, but without any sense of finality or resolution. Otho the Great can be readily dismissed from further discussion; Keats's play deserves the obscurity it has obtained.

Coleridge launched what amounts to a success story among Romantic playwrights with Remorse--a play produced

at Drury Lane in 1813 with the assistance of Lord Byron. Remorse ran only twenty nights, but the fact that it ran at all is testament to the public taste for melodrama--for Remorse is melodrama through and through. (7)

Like most melodramas, Remorse is a tale of disguise and intrigue, set in a dark and mysterious distant land, and populated with characters of uncertain descent and outlandish names. A glance at the location of the scenes gives away the tone of the play:

- I, i "Sea-shore"
  - ii "Sea-shore...within view of the Castle"
- II, i "A wild and mountainous country"
  - ii "The inside of a Cottage, around which flowers and plants of various kinds are seen."
- III, i "A Hall of Armory, with an altar at the back of the stage"
  - ii "Interior of a Chapel"
- IV, i "A Cavern, dark..."
  - ii "The interior Court of a Saracenic or Gothic Castle, with the iron Gate of a Dungeon visible."
  - iii "The Mountains by Moonlight~"
- V, i "A Dungeon" (8)

With a little imagination one can imagine how each of these settings forms the backdrop to a spectacle unabashedly calculated to appeal to the senses.

The action of the plot is stock melodrama also. The play is about a passion--remorse. The lovesick hero (Alvar) returns home in disguise to see his love and test her faithfulness. Alvar decides to strike at the

villain, Ordonio, through Ordonio's conscience. The hero disguises himself as a mysterious wizard and gives Ordonio the tempting offer of the reanimation of the dead.(9)

The most memorable (and silly) scene is Alvar's incantation to call up the departed. As Alvar pronounces his incantation, Coleridge calls for "a strain of music...heard from behind the scene."(10) The spectacle of the revelation of Alvar's supposed assassination is worth reproducing in its entirety:

[The whole music clashes into a Chorus.

CHORUS

Wandering demons hear the spell!  
Lest a blacker charm compel--

[The incense on the altar takes fire suddenly, and an illuminated picture of ALVAR's assassination is discovered, and having remained a few seconds, is then hidden by ascending flames.

Ord. [starting in great agitation] Duped! duped!  
duped!--  
the traitor Isidore!

[At this instant the doors are forced open, MONVIEDRO and the FAMILIARS of the INQUISITION, SERVANTS, etc., enter and fill the stage.(11)

We can easily imagine the effect upon an audience of this flamboyant and ludicrously exaggerated spectacle.

(Incidentally, the Chorus of this scene is suspiciously reminiscent of the Witches' choruses in Macbeth.) The



rest of the plot is only the framework for an equally preposterous series of episodes. Alvar hopes to save Ordonio by calling up "one pang of true remorse." (12) Ordonio refuses to embrace Alvar, saying, "Touch me not! /Touch not pollution, Alvar! I will die." (13) Alvar and Teresa conveniently and graciously prevent Ordonio from falling on his sword. Equally graciously, Ordonio begs forgiveness as he dies. (14) At the end of Remorse, all the plot elements resolve, the heroes are vindicated and the villains receive their due punishment; of course, the evil characters recognize their villainy before they die and make deathbed amends.

Finally, Coleridge displays remarkable little faculty for writing for actors. One of the curious characteristics of Shakespeare's plays is the absence of stage directions. For the most part left to their own devices, performers of Shakespeare must evaluate the motivations and attitudes of their characters from the evidence of the lines themselves. Coleridge prefers a more direct method, confining his actors with stage directions like,

Here Valdez bends back and smiles at her wildness,  
which Teresa noticing, checks her enthusiasm, and  
in a soothing half-playful tone and manner,  
apologizes for her fancy, by the little tale in

the parenthesis. (15)

By specifying so clearly what he wants Coleridge inhibits the customary tendency of actors to allow their actions and feelings to arise as the natural consequence of what they are saying. To be so explicit can only result in a forced, unnatural, and unbelievable performance.

Coleridge's Remorse is an attempt by a great poet to enter the mainstream of Romantic-era drama by imitating the popular melodramatic form. In one sense, Coleridge succeeded in that he satisfied the public's taste for melodrama. But in a larger sense, Coleridge failed because outside of the era of melodrama Remorse only typifies bad literature. While Coleridge avoided the risk of dangerous innovation, he guaranteed the obscurity of his drama by making it unexceptional, uninspired, and uninteresting.

A much more interesting experimental drama is William Wordsworth's only play, The Borderers, composed in 1796-7 and published in 1842. While Remorse fits into the pattern of popular melodrama, Wordsworth genuinely tried to solve the romantic problem. Although The Borderers failed on the stage, Wordsworth composed a play of more depth and complexity than Coleridge. We can see in The Borderers the products of a serious effort to reconcile Romantic themes with the dramatic form.

Wordsworth failed to write a good play, but he did write an interesting play. The interest in The Borderers lies in the combination of a number of themes. The villain Oswald appears as a Byronic hero-criminal, and Oswald's treachery is like Iago's in Othello. There are other Shakespearean echoes in The Borderers. Wordsworth makes the claim that suffering frees the nobility of the mind, a conclusion that may be drawn from another of The Borderers' predecessors--King Lear. Wordsworth also mixes in a number of purely Romantic themes.

In The Borderers, a tale of a band of borderers in Northern England at the time of Henry III, Oswald tricks Marmaduke into abandoning the elderly, blind wanderer Herbert on a desolate moor. The treachery of the villain Oswald in The Borderers strongly echoes that of another, more famous villain in dramatic history--the arch-villain of Shakespearean drama, Iago of Othello. The most striking aspect of Iago's evil is the fact that it has no clearly discernable origin. Coleridge describes one of Iago's soliloquies, and by inference, all of his actions, as "the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity." (16) Similarly, Oswald is compelled by some unseen and unknowable force to commit his crimes. Wallace comments that

...these needs no other motive

Than that most strange incontinence in crime  
 Which haunts this Oswald. Power is life to him  
 And breath and being; where he cannot govern,  
 He will destroy.(17)

Like Iago's, Oswald's treachery seems less an explainable personal trait than a visible symptom of an omnipresent universal evil. Motives pale in significance beside the appearance of unreasonable and unreasoning evil; as Wallace says, "Natures such as his /Spin motives out of their bowels...!"(18)

There are other echoes of Shakespeare in The Borderers, too singular to be merely coincidental. When we see in Act III Marmaduke and Herbert alone on the moor, the scene in King Lear of Gloucester and Edgar at what Gloucester thinks are the cliffs of Dover springs immediately to mind.(19) But, aside from the similarities in setting and characters, these two scenes share little in common in terms of dramatic intensity or explication of character self. Perhaps the most significant contribution the study of these two scenes can make is as an example of how profoundly different were the dramatic sensibilities of Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Shakespeare's scene is actually funny; we are treated to the sight of the blind Gloucester "falling" down what he believes are the precipitous

cliffs of Dover and is actually a small hillock. There is clearly no room for humor in Wordsworth's scene. Wordsworth feels compelled to treat nature seriously as a setting; Shakespeare could never get away with putting Gloucester actually on the cliffs. Shakespeare's scene is innovative and memorable, Wordsworth's conventional and flat.

One possible interpretation of King Lear is that Lear finds his identity and fulfills his noble destiny only after he is destroyed by a crushing fate. What is a possibility in Lear is a certainty in The Borderers--Wordsworth embraces the concept, common to Romanticism as well as reminiscent of Shakespeare, that suffering frees the nobility of the mind or human spirit. Marmaduke protests loudly when he learns that he abandoned Herbert on the moor thinking Herbert was guilty of monstrosities. He bristles at Oswald's evil, for Oswald lied and tricked Marmaduke into abandoning Herbert. Oswald tells Marmaduke,

...You have struck home,  
With a few drops of blood cut short the business;  
Therein for ever you must yield to me.  
But what is done will save you from the blank  
Of living without knowledge that you live:  
Now you are suffering...(20)

In Oswald's warped set of values the suffering that results from committing a heinous crime frees the human spirit; as he exults to Marmaduke, "You have cast off the chains /That fettered your nobility of mind--/Delivered heart and head!"(21) Interestingly, Lear's final nobility comes from the crushing weight of suffering that was the result of committing an error--dividing his kingdom. For Oswald and Marmaduke, suffering comes as the result of committing a crime.

The idea of the hero-criminal in The Borderers is not new. Byron devised the prototype hero-criminal in his numerous Romantic tales. The Byronic hero-criminal is a suffering spirit enslaved by laws he cannot comprehend. Out to avenge himself on a cruel and oppressive natural order, the hero-criminal breaks every law that inhibits his natural freedom. As Oswald appeals to Marmaduke,

Let us be fellow-labourers, then, to enlarge  
Man's intellectual empire. We subsist  
In slavery; all is slavery; we receive  
Law, but we ask not whence those laws have come;  
We need an inward sting to goad us on.(22)

In the previous chapter I discussed how the rejection of society and society's bonds did not lead to the complete freedom the Romantics had hoped for. This short quote

typifies the attitude of the Romantics; a cosmic slavery of natural law imposed by God replaces the slavery of social convention.

Other Romantic notions find a voice in The Borderers: the permanence of suffering, the rejection of the world, and the tragic isolation of the individual human spirit. The great weight of a universe hostile to man's yearnings for freedom indicates the permanence of suffering; all action in the here and now is but vain gesturing. As Oswald explains, "Action is transitory--a step, a blow, /The motion of a muscle--this way or that--/'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy /We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed: /Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark, /And shares the nature of infinity." (23) Only in rejecting the imposed order of life can that suffering be alleviated or justified. Again in Oswald's words, "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." (24) The only possible result of the rejection of the exterior world and the burden of infinite suffering is the ultimate isolation of self. The Romantics could never find a home among mankind. They were always "Restless Minds, /Such Minds as find amid their

fellow-men /No heart that loves them, none that they can love, /Will turn perforce and seek for sympathy /In dim relation to imagined Beings."(25) When we look through the eyes of Wordsworth's characters and the words of his pen, we see a play that is an apologia for the Romantic movement.

The thematic complexity of The Borderers sets it apart from the melodrama of the age. The Borderers echoes Shakespeare, and transmits many of the Romantics' concerns, but it is a failure as drama. The Borderers is essentially a pastoral. The love of nature which prompts Wordsworth to write many fine poems condemns his play to inescapable boredom. The dramatic pastoral has not consistently proven itself in Western literary history. Even Milton's pastoral masques are only barely tolerable as serious drama. Ironically, only Shakespeare could write a successful pastoral drama (As You Like It). Somehow the tranquil ruggedness of nature which so invigorates poetry engenders a dramatic quagmire. Nature simply doesn't work onstage. The stage is a created artifice, the isolated recreation of a portion of the human experience under strictly controlled conditions. But reproducing nature within four walls stretches dramatic credibility beyond the breaking point. There is something about human nature that makes audiences reject



the hypocrisy of seeing nature-lovers wandering on stage. In Shakespeare's tragedies, the out of doors is either a setting for battle or a place of hostility. Nature is only visited in Shakespeare's comedies. In The Borderers, nature is more than just a setting; it is a more profound matrix of human activity. The Romantics embraced the dynamics of man and nature and wrote great poetry. The stage is simply not the medium for the study of such metaphysics.

All the other standard criticisms of Romantic drama apply; Wordsworth's characters lack depth as individuals and tension as groups. As Michael R. Booth and others neatly sum up in The Revels History of Drama in English,

...if The Borderers will not do as a play we must recognize its virtues as a poem; the arguments in favour of what appears to be crime in the interest of a high conception of justice are engrossing, but they are useless in the theatre, being bodied forth in lumbering action and a kind of verse in which all the characters speak alike. Wordsworth could not make his metaphysics into good drama. (26)

Wordsworth did try to solve the Romantic problem, but failed.

To be fair, Shelley did not write Prometheus Unbound

to be performed. Because of its sheer length and the appearance of such ethereal characters as The Earth, Ocean, The Spirit of the Earth, The Spirit of the Moon, Spirits of the Hours, and assorted Echoes, Fauns, Furies, and Spirits, Prometheus Unbound is clearly for reading only. Nevertheless, it is described on the title page as, "A Lyrical Drama, In Four Acts." This quasi-dramatic poem is not really a stageplay but is an important part of Romantic literature. Prometheus Unbound is worth an examination from the standpoint of the continuation of Romantic themes present in other works as well. The saga of Prometheus is really the saga of the Romantics, for Prometheus Unbound recreates in microcosm the philosophical struggles of Romanticism.

The storyline of Prometheus Unbound is really quite simple. At first, the bound Prometheus writhes in tragic lamentation and the world shares his pain. Then, after Jupiter is overthrown and Prometheus is unbound, everything is happy and love rules all. The philosophical struggles of Prometheus, the suffering hero, are not so simple.

Shelley's most striking theme is his blatant rejection of God. Obviously, Prometheus' incarceration is the punishment awarded by a jealous, tyrannical God. In a larger sense, however, Prometheus stands as a

representative of a chained humanity--Prometheus calls on  
God to

regard this earth

Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou  
Requittest for knee-worship, prayer, and praise,  
And toil, and hecatombs of broken hearts,  
With fear, and self-contempt, and barren hope;...(27)

Prometheus embraces the vision of a desolate earth and a  
tortured humanity. Prometheus' suffering represents the  
suffering of all men; and God is to blame. Consider the  
following exchange between Asia and Demogorgon:

Asia

Who made the living world?

Demogorgon

God.

Asia

Who made all

That it contains--thought, passion, reason, will,  
Imagination?

Demogorgon

God: Almighty God.

Asia

Who made that same which, when the winds of spring  
In rarest visitation, or the voice  
Of one beloved hand in youth alone,

Fills the faint eyes with falling tears which dim  
 The radiant looks of unbewailing flowers,  
 And leaves this peopled earth a solitude  
 When it returns no more?

Demogorgon

Merciful God.

Asia

And who made terror, madness, crime, remorse,  
 Which from the links of the great chain of things,  
 To every thought within the mind of man  
 Sway and drag heavily, and each one reels  
 Under the load towards the pit of death;  
 Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate;  
 And self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood;  
 Pain, whose unheeded and familiar speech  
 Is howling, and keen shrieks, day after day;  
 And Hell, or the sharp fear of Hell?

Demogorgon

He reigns. (28)

Shelley's condemnation marks the most vivid portrayal of an emerging Romantic theme--man's revolt against God. God supervised and protected the world of the Augustans. But for the Romantics, men were free at last from all but one vestige of an authority greater than the individual: God. The recognition of God's tyranny went hand in hand

with the scathing indictment of God's protectorate over earth. If He were indeed merciful, why does God shackle His children with the pain, suffering, and torment of human existence? This question, at shocking odds with the centuries-old tradition of strict obedience to God, will recur in Romantic literature.

Not only does God cruelly shackle those whom he allegedly loves, according to Shelley, but mankind itself is too corrupt to attain spiritual nobility. As Fury explains to Prometheus,

The good want power, but to weep barren tears;  
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them;  
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;  
And all best things are thus confused to ill.  
Many are strong and rich, and would be just,  
But live among their suffering fellow men

As if none felt: they know not what they do.(29)

All human endeavor is thus doomed from the start; Shelley sounds his most chilling note of despair with the words, "they know not what they do," spoken by Jesus upon the cross.(30)

Despite the Biblical reference, Shelley tells a story not of redemption but of rebellion. Prometheus gains his nobility when he gains his freedom by overthrowing God the tyrant. Indeed, Prometheus' victory

exemplifies man's greatest calling, which is

To defy power which seems omnipotent;  
 To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:  
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.(31)

Only by breaking the chains of a tyrant God can Prometheus (and by inference, man) realize the true nobility of the human spirit.

Prometheus Unbound stands as the most unobscured example of a genre peculiar to the Romantic Age: an unstageable play whose themes are the ideals of Romanticism. Shelley, perhaps the most violently atheistic Romantic, chose Prometheus Unbound as the setting for the burning Romantic questions of man's relationship to God. For the first time in Western history, man was challenging God's wisdom and authority, and establishing the inherent greatness of the spirit of mankind. The chained Prometheus is symbolic of the Romantic authors--oppressed, shackled by pain and self-contempt, and having cast off the fetters of society only to realize the existence of the stronger fetters of God.

Shelley's other dramatic attempt, The Cenci, is completely unlike Prometheus Unbound and resembles instead Wordsworth's The Borderers or Coleridge's Remorse in that Shelley explores Romantic themes through a more conventional dramatic form. Unlike Prometheus Unbound, The Cenci was intended for the stage, although it was not performed until 1886, kept private because of the incest theme.(32) In The Cenci, Shelley uses Romantic motifs and perception, but builds his study on the framework of a pseudo-Elizabethan technique.

The essence of Shelley's story is the internal struggle of Beatrice--Count Cenci's daughter.(33) Through most of the play, Cenci conducts invective tirades against his family, finally culminating in the rape of his daughter. Beatrice, her innocence lost to her father, conspires to murder him. The singular effect Shelley achieves is not the change Beatrice undergoes; the singular effect he achieves is that Beatrice's change is entirely internal. Stage relationships are subordinated to the study of self. According to Terry Otten, "The dramatic tension is present solely in character."(34) Shelley, through Beatrice, sounds the familiar Romantic theme of self-revelation--the awareness of self that is central to Romanticism but a curse to effective drama.

Beatrice shares with Prometheus a condemnation of God. In Beatrice's case, however, the rejection of God takes the form of a simple and unaffected recognition of God's heartlessness. Beatrice claims that "Many might doubt that there were a God above /Who sees and permits evil, and so die: /That faith no agony shall obscure in me." (35) God's tacit approval of evil only makes Beatrice's plight more poignant.

Beatrice's character is explored through the framework of a "pseudo-Elizabethan plot." (36) Although Shelley writes about Romantic ideas, he imitates the Shakespearean form. Shelley's imitation of Shakespeare on the one hand offered him the opportunity to experiment with a tried and successful style, and on the other hand condemned him to bear the halter of a historic genius. In short, according to Otten,

His dilemma was not that the contemporary stage accepted only the pattern of pseudo-Elizabethan drama but that he had no other structural types to imitate and no means of experimenting with dramatic form on stage. Furthermore, Shelley's own close reading of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Calderon inhibited his vision. We sometimes forget that a modern dramatist writes with over a hundred-and-fifty years of experimental drama



behind him, whereas the romantic poets were caught between a moribund dramatic tradition and the development of new dramatic forms not yet conceivable on the English stage. Shelley used Elizabethan dramaturgy not because he hoped to make the play acceptable to the current stage but because he could see no alternative. (37)

The techniques of Elizabethan dramaturgy that Shelley uses are evident but not in themselves significant. What is significant is Shelley's attempt to further Romanticism through Shakespearean technique--in this case, pouring new wine into old bottles.

Despite Shelley's recreation of Elizabethan technique, he fails to produce a workable drama. Shelley's errors are not only unfortunate but glaring. For example, the character of Marzio commits suicide by holding his breath. The ending, as Otten points out, lacks a classical completion. In his zest to explore Beatrice's character, Shelley neglects a proper dramatic resolution of the rest of the play, and denies any larger social significance of the action. Shelley provides for "no denouement, no resolution, no reassertion of social law. The societal or cosmic order, on which scale a classical protagonist's fate must ultimately be weighed, is simply irrelevant." (38) As usual, the Romantic

preoccupation with character precludes an effective overall dramatic effect.

As we have seen, Shelley's failure to write truly good drama is not without company. Each of the attempts of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley represent various approaches to Romantic drama. Each play is experimental in the sense that the authors all employed slightly different (and largely new) techniques in their handling of dramatic form--from Keats's typical Gothic play, through Coleridge's clumsy study of a passion in isolation, Wordsworth's pastoral Shakespearean echoes, Shelley's radical abandonment of traditional dramatic form and his blend of Elizabethan theater with Romantic themes. Byron's conspicuous absence from this list is because of his partial success; his dramatic attempts are the subject of the next chapter.

There is one thing all these plays share in common--they are intolerably bad drama. At the beginning of this chapter I explained the various internal and external factors which prevented Romanticism and drama from completely uniting. These factors combined to produce the insurmountable Romantic problem--that Romanticism and dramatic form are, conceptually speaking, mutually exclusive. The Romantic authors I discuss in this chapter all tried various solution to the Romantic

problem, and all failed. The twin inhibitions of theater history and Romantic consciousness proved to be simply too much for the Romantics. Devoid of practical experience, fearful of audiences, neglecting dramatic technique in favor of exploration of character, and overshadowed by a Shakespeare they worshipped and imitated but could never emulate, the Romantics condemned themselves to the failure to formulate a workable solution to the romantic problem of dramatic form.

## Chapter Five: Byron and the Solution

In the previous chapter I described how Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley all failed more or less in their efforts to write drama of enduring quality. One Romantic author is conspicuously absent--Byron. Lord Byron stands apart from his fellow Romantic authors because his dramatic products differ significantly from theirs in both quantity and quality. Byron wrote seven complete plays and one dramatic fragment. While none of his plays is currently performed, as a group they enjoy a relative familiarity among scholars. Manfred is frequently read as poetry, and Verdi made The Two Foscari into an opera. Qualitatively, Byron's plays fall neatly into three groups: the historical plays (Marino Faliero, Sardanapalus, and The Two Foscari), the metaphysical plays (Manfred, Cain, Heaven and Earth, and The Deformed Transformed), and melodrama (Werner). Byron met varied success with each of these three groups. The historical plays, partly classical, partly melodramatic, differ from predecessors like Otho the Great and The Borderers in that Byron's plays deal with specific historical events. Werner typifies the melodramatic genre and suffers from the same flaws. It is through his experimental plays that Byron makes his contribution to drama. Like

Prometheus Unbound, Byron's metaphysical dramas incorporate Romantic themes in an unconventional style and setting. But, while Prometheus Unbound is hopeless as drama, Manfred mates Romanticism to drama more effectively, even though Manfred is still clumsy and overwrought. Cain, and its fragmentary epilogue, Heaven and Earth, stand apart as revolutionary in both content and form. Cain especially represents a unique solution to the Romantic problem of drama. Even though Cain might present some problems on stage, it is alone among Romantic drama in that it works dramatically. Although all of his other plays represent more or less typical Romantic dramatic failures, through Cain, Byron found the answer to the Romantic problem. Ironically (or perhaps unsurprisingly), contemporary audiences rejected Cain. While finding the key to the Romantic dilemma, Byron unwittingly wrote a play that is not of its own time, for Cain takes Byron out of Romanticism and propels him into the modern age. Byron is unique among Romantic poets because he alone solved the Romantic problem and led the way to post-Romantic modernism.

Because of his unique place among Romantic authors, Byron deserves a closer look. In his life we can see the birth and growth of those attitudes and beliefs which would shape his literature as an adult.

In his early childhood Byron was exposed to religious beliefs that would figure largely in his later works, especially Cain and Heaven and Earth. Byron was reared in strict Calvinism by his nurse. He was intimately familiar with the Bible and re-read many of its stories. Byron was captivated by dramatic stories like that of Cain and Abel, and terrified by their import. For Byron soon learned that both sides of his family had lawless and violent ancestors. As one scholar suggests,

...the poet's lifelong obsession with the idea that he was predestined to innate and inescapable evil was shaped by the Old Testament conception, nurtured by the Calvinistic teaching of his nurse and his Presbyterian tutors, and strengthened by his increasing awareness of the dark history of his own ancestors.(1).

As we shall see, this "lifelong obsession" formed in Byron's early years would haunt his literature.

Other thoughts would haunt Byron's life. Byron would always be wrestling with his sexuality. In 1799, when aged eleven, Byron was subjected to the improper liberties of the family maid, May Gray.(2) In his mid-teens Byron was approached by Lord Grey, his senior by eight years.(3) In 1813 Byron conducted an affair

with his half-sister Augusta Leigh.(4) Byron married Annabella Millbanke in 1815, but he was still tormented by his longing for Augusta.(5) A year later, Annabella left her husband for good amid scandals of Byron's apparent insanity and his affair with Augusta.(6) Byron took up an affair with the pretty, eighteen-year-old Clair Clermont, which resulted in a child.(7) By the end of the decade Byron was living a life of dissipation and promiscuity in Venice, and cultivated an affair with the Countess Teresa Guicciolo.(8) With respect to liaisons with members of the opposite or the same sex Byron lead a checkered life which would constantly surface in the themes of his works. Incest (central to The Bride of Abydos) was a theme to which Byron continually reverted.(9)

Though haunted by perverse passions, Byron was motivated by noble causes as well. Despite, or perhaps because of, his clubfoot, Byron insisted on being physically active, and was always ready to spring to the defense of the overpowered or outnumbered. At Harrow, Byron fought fiercely for respect and acceptance among his schoolmates. He defended other boys from bullies, and played all the sports, even cricket.(10) Always supporting the underdog, Byron dreamed of a free Greece.(11) In his maiden speech in Parliament he spoke

on behalf of the frame-breaking Nottingham weavers.(12)  
In his later years Byron supported the Italian Carbonari movement.(13)

The element of crusade spread also to Byron's relationship with the theater. Byron's attitudes toward the theater were paradoxical. Unlike the other Romantics, Byron attempted to become involved with the theater. He developed an early interest in Classical and Shakespearean drama and was an amateur actor at Harrow and Cambridge.(14) In 1815 Byron became a member of the Subcommittee of Management of Drury Lane. While there he tried unsuccessfully to secure good plays from well-known authors, for he had earlier helped stage Coleridge's Remorse.(15) However, eventually, Byron was repelled by a theater industry he considered decayed and worthless. He once read most of the five hundred plays in the Drury Lane library, hoping to find something suitable for the stage.(16) Not only did nothing meet with his satisfaction, but the plays then in production were so bad and the audiences so boorish that Byron finally decided not to risk writing for the English stage.

Although Byron worked hard to write drama that would rescue the English stage from the tawdry excesses of Gothic melodrama, it is of course because of his poetry that Byron is so well-known. Byron's poetry has been



routinely and extensively analyzed; however, examined in terms of Byron's dramatic themes his poetry gains unique significance. In fact, in Byronic poetry we can trace the development of those themes which, like his personal beliefs and moral standards, would play so prominent a part in his drama.

Byron stands apart from the other Romantic poets. Not only do the details of his life and the quantity and quality of his drama mark him as different, but Byron's whole philosophy of literature and style of poetry separate him from the other great Romantics. Byron believed fervently in the value of classical literary technique. Although a Romantic at heart, he admired Augustan economy of style and precision of discernment. In the words of one biographer,

Among the five major Romantic poets--Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Byron--Byron is unique. He did not share with the others the exalted conception of the poetic imagination as the medium of revelation of ultimate truth. It was impossible for him to believe long in the benevolent naturalism of Wordsworth or to accept Shelley's faith in the perfectibility of man. Coleridge's abstruse thought was beyond Byron's grasp, though his intelligence was acute and

logical; and the visionary insight of Keats was foreign to his experience. Augustan in his allegiances, naming Pope as his master, Byron was fundamentally a Romantic--albeit a Romantic paradox. (17)

At the heart of Byron's paradoxical nature was the realization that he was a Classical author with a Romantic spirit. He imitated Pope and others as he explored Romantic themes; his inner passion was always at odds with his "Classical will power." (18)

This turmoil between passion and restraint guaranteed that his literature would reflect the tensions and activity of his own life. Jacques Barzun describes Byron's "special power" as his ability to "give us not so much the illusion or the total harmony of life but rather its animation." (19) In fact, art to Byron represented the possibility of mental and spiritual action. As Barzun continues, "What Byron increasingly asked of life was not subjects for poems but opportunities for doing." (20) In light of Byron's intellectual dynamism it is easy to understand his concomitant distaste for the Romantic ideal of a serenely fertile imagination. Byron attacked the Romantic notion of seeking their "essential spiritual heritage" through "Imagination as the new Absolute." (21) Byron sought to grasp, examine, and discover; his

"'imagination' is not creative (in the Romantic sense), it is analytic and critical (in the philosophic sense)."(22) He tried to embrace pragmatic discovery rather than abstract reflection. Byron lived in a real world and tried to write of mankind in the concrete.(23)

Structurally, Byron's attempts to write about real men and their genuine problems are at once brilliant and disappointing--brilliant, because Byron creatively and deftly suits his poetry to his purpose; and disappointing, because at the same time we can see the underlying hallmarks of Byron's failure as a dramatist. Byron's poetry, though in many ways different from that of his contemporaries, is outstanding in its own right. "Lacking the 'hewn' simplicity of Wordsworth's best lines, the lyricism of Shelley, the richness and intensity of Keats, and the wizardry of Coleridge," concludes one biographer, "Byron's style has force, fire, and clarity. Spontaneous eloquence is its hallmark."(24) Nevertheless his poetry contains structural flaws that would prove fatal in drama. As the same biographer declares of Byron's "Childe Harold," the unity of the poem is tonal and not structural. Byron achieves his tone not through dramatic narration but by the conception of the main character, "and in the strength and verve of the poetry by which he is presented."(25) Another critic

has pointed out Byron's failure to establish a dramatic tension between the two main characters of "Childe Harold"--the hero and the narrator. The critic details the failure "to establish any significant relationship between them; therefore, they co-exist but do not interact. The one is not observed and criticised by the other." (26) this failure would doom Byron's drama.

Byron is not unique among Romantics in his failure to muster dramatic tension in his characters. Unlike the other Romantics, however, Byron only partly shared their self-consciousness that so crippled the dramatic efforts of the other Romantics. True to his era, Byron led a creative life that has been described as a "pilgrimage in quest of self-realization." (27) But, Byron's quest did not lead to crippling self-consciousness. I have already used Byron's "Childe Harold" as an example of Romantic self-consciousness. However, Byron did not have both feet in the Romantic camp; other, later, works of his betray a rejection of self-consciousness. Byron attempted to free himself from self-consciousness. "Childe Harold" shows us Byron at his most self-conscious. As he matured, Byron learned to transform self-consciousness into less debilitating forms. By the time he wrote "Don Juan," Byron was free from the crippling effects of self-awareness.

"Don Juan," a rambling narrative that follows the titled hero through many a whimsical and perilous adventure throughout the Mediterranean and its adjacent lands, is an ideal example of a successful Romantic poem that avoids telltale self-consciousness. Throughout the poem, Byron the author remains in the background as the consciousness of poem supplants consciousness of self. Continual references to the poem itself ("some stanzas back," etc.) ensure that the reader is caught up in the poetry rather than trapped in the mind of the poet. Don Juan himself recognizes that self cannot be a refuge:

No more--no more--Oh! no more, my heart,  
 Canst thou be my sole world, my universe!  
 Once all in all, but now a thing apart,  
 Thou canst not be my blessing or my curse.  
 This illusion's gone for ever, and thou art  
 Insensible, I trust, but none the worse,  
 And in thy stand I've got a deal of judgment,  
 Though heaven knows how it ever found a  
 lodgment. (28)

Where "Childe Harold" fails, the later "Don Juan" succeeds, although they share similar subject matter. The success of "Don Juan" is a result of the avoidance of self-consciousness, an avoidance which permits Byron to engage in humor, satire, and a lack of pretense that make

"Don Juan" better poetry and considerably preferable reading.

While Byron eventually learns to avoid self-consciousness, he carries out character study progressively further until he generates perhaps his most significant contribution to the philosophy of his age--the Byronic hero-criminal. The genesis of the Byronic hero lies in the main character of Byron's poem, "The Prisoner of Chillon." Byron was inspired by the story of this legendary figure and describes the plight of a hero-in-chains, a sort of prototype Promethean hero: the "Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind!"(29) The best verse tale, "The Prisoner of Chillon" is the story of an imprisoned sixteenth-century patriot, Francois Bonivard, who ultimately becomes the symbol of the oppressed noble spirit.(30)

Gradually the "oppressed noble spirit" evolves into a spirit that questions authority and denies any responsibility save that to his own heart: the Byronic hero. Through the Byronic hero, Byron captures the struggle of man to find fulfillment outside of society's bonds.(31) As Barzun describes Byron's new exploration, Byron "dramatize[s] the attitude of the new man, the mysterious unknown who has experienced Faustian longings but who, not finding a constructive social task, risks

life for the glory of revenging mankind on society."(32)  
 The Byronic hero-criminal owes its formation not only to  
 "The Prisoner of Chillon" but to Byron's Eastern tales  
 and "Childe Harold" as well;

In fact, the heroes of all six of...[the] Eastern  
 tales--the Giaour, Selim, Conrad, Lara, Hugo, and  
 Alp--are variations of Harold: they are gloomy,  
 masanthropic, and lonely, but, unlike him, they  
 are intrepid, lawless, and fiercely passionate.  
 Endowed with illicit desires, guilt, remorse, and  
 revenge, and equipped with fictitious adventures,  
 these outlaw-heroes play their romantic tragedies  
 against a background of Byron's own Eastern  
 experiences.(33)

Byron's hero-criminal gave the Romantics an archetypal  
 figure that filled their need for a hero of Romanticism.  
 through his efforts, "the stock hero of the Gothic novel  
 was revived and given new currency by Byron, who endowed  
 him with the attributes of romantic melancholy, pride,  
 solitariness, guilty passion, defiance, violent revenge,  
 and remorse."(34)

A number of factors in Byron's life led  
 psychologically to a reinforcement of the Byronic hero  
 ideal, including a fascination with the wild exploits of  
 his uncle, and persistent guilt from his Calvinistic

upbringing and his early sexual experiences. As he matured, being an outsider in London led Byron "to admire men who were proud, isolated, and rebellious, exiles or outlaws from society." (35) More fuel was added by a "disenchantment with civilization...and his strong attraction to the semi-barbaric, violent, and passionate aspects of the life of the East." (36)

Byron's poetry and life provide us with a number of clues that aid in the evaluation of his drama. Byron's turbulent life and the nature of his poetry go hand in hand. He was a paradox of Romanticism and Classicism; he was a man of intellectual animation and considerable poetic skill. Byron's significant contributions include the eventual rejection of self-consciousness and the development of the hero-criminal. All these factors combine to form a backdrop against which we may more fruitfully examine Byron's drama.

The intellectual complexity and uniqueness of Byron's life and work set him apart from the rest of the Romantics. His plays reflect many of his own beliefs that also surface in his poetry. Unlike those of the other Romantics, Byron's plays have been subjected to relatively large amounts of critical attention.

Full-length studies include W. Gerard's Byron Restudied in His Dramas (1886), S. C. Chew's The Dramas of Lord



Byron: A Critical Study (1915), Bonamy Dobree's Byron's Dramas (1962), Kavita Sharma's Byron's Plays: A Reassessment (1982), and a host of lesser essays and articles on individual plays.(37) Most of Byron's plays, as these authors point out, repeat the same patterns of failure of other Romantic plays. Rather than conduct an exhaustive study of all of Byron's plays, I will focus on that one (Cain) which I feel succeeds among all Romantic drama. Although these other authors do not acknowledge the fact, Byron breaks the pattern of Romantic dramatic failure through Cain.

Byron wanted to reform English drama through well-constructed appeals to the cultural elite.(38) These appeals took the form of closet dramas. Legend has it that Byron in a self-critical moment once remarked that his plays were "fit only for the ----closet." Byron's closet dramas, intended for private audiences only, were designed to renew interest in the Classical English mode.(39) In the context of Byron's Romantic-Classical paradox it is easy to understand how he could attempt Classicism while exhibiting a Romantic fear of audiences.

Byron's analytical bent determined what subjects he would choose for his closet dramas; not for him was the lyrical naturalism of Wordsworth or the singular passions

of Coleridge. Byron embraced classicism;

This rationalistic common sense side of Byron's nature, this anomalous survival of classicism into the heart of romanticism, led him naturally to the historical drama, because of its comparatively slight dependence upon imagination, its harmony with a rationalistic conception of intellectual activity, its basis upon experience.(40)

Byron's historical dramas (as their group name suggests) describe actual historic events. Byron explains that his "object has been to dramatize, like the Greeks,...striking passages of history, as they did of history and mythology."(41)

Although Byron thought historical subjects fitting, he specifically tried to avoid imitating that other dramatic historian, Shakespeare. Byron's previous quote continued, "You will find all of this very unlike Shakespeare; and so much the better, in one sense, for I look upon him to be the worst of models, though the most extraordinary of writers."(42) Byron contradicts the other Romantics in his embrace of classicism and in his rejection of Shakespeare. He decided that his closet dramas would only suffer from Elizabethan construction.(43) Nevertheless, although Byron recognized the danger that Shakespeare idolization held

to Romantic creativity, he could not shake his awareness of Shakespeare despite his best efforts. Barzun contends that

Byron's battle for Pope is a battle against the universal Shakespeare worship. Byron too knew his Shakespeare by heart and could not get rid of him completely enough to succeed in the French genre, but he correctly judged that the great idol was an incubus on contemporary playwrights. (44)

Byron never could completely escape the awareness of Shakespeare. By way of example, Samuel Chew's book lists thirty quotes from Marino Faliero that either closely parallel or duplicate quotes from Macbeth, Henry IV, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Henry VIII, Measure for Measure, Richard III, As You Like It, Hamlet, and The Merchant of Venice. (45) Byron stands alone among the Romantics for his intuitive realization that Shakespeare worship could only lead to failure. Ironically, Byron could not escape the Romantic awareness of Shakespeare, and as a result his historical plays suffer.

As Byron rejects Shakespeare he reaches back to other dramatic traditions. Byron fought against his Romantic contemporaries and held up Pope as his idol. Samuel Chew explains Byron's adherence to the classical rules as a desire to find relief through structure. The

sloppily organized drama of the day offended Byron, and he "was tired of his own Romantic license." (46)

Typically, Byron contradicts himself by admiring the classical rules but not employing them properly. In practice, Byron follows the unities only loosely. Marino Faliero typifies the loose attention to the unities. The Two Foscari, Cain, and Heaven and Earth ignore the unity of place, but the action in each play covers only two days, three hours, and one night respectively. Manfred covers three nights but Byron achieves a unifying effect anyway. In Werner and The Deformed Transformed, his last plays, Byron ignores the unities; evidently, by then he had tired of his self-imposed restrictions. Although Byron's attention to the unities is by no means as slavish as that on the part of Augustan playwrights, it forms an important part of Byron's attitudes toward Classicism and Romanticism.

Structurally, Byron embraces Classicism. Thematically, Byron rejects Classicism and discusses typical Romantic ideas. Byron's haunting feeling that he is predestined to evil expresses a Romantic theme that surfaces in many of his plays. His historical plays depict characters trapped in a doom of their own making. Because of its more metaphysical nature, Manfred contains more readily discernable signs of an inexplicable doom

that hangs over the head of the hero. Manfred suffers from an unexplainable guilt that targets him for mysterious divine wrath. In Act I, Scene i, a disembodied voice utters a curse on Manfred that condemns him to eternal sleepless sorrow. Manfred's only crime seems to be an overpowering foulness of character of unknown origin. He laments,

If it be life to wear within myself  
This barrenness of spirit, and to be  
My own soul's sepulchre, for I have ceased  
To justify my deeds unto myself--  
The last infirmity of evil.(47)

Not only does Manfred suffer from a "barrenness of spirit," but he is keenly aware of his own mortality. Byron has many characters continually refer to Manfred as "clay" or "Child of clay." Manfred himself has "no sympathy with breathing flesh, /Nor midst the creatures of clay" around him.(48) He escapes to the wilderness. There, unless left alone, he feels "all clay again." (49) Even though Manfred flees humanity he cannot flee his own humanness:

"...we, who name ourselves its [the world's]  
sovereigns, we,  
Half dust, half deity, alike unfit  
To sink or soar, with our mix'd essence make

A conflict of its elements, and breathe  
 The breath of degradation and pride,  
 Contending with low wants and lofty will,  
 Till our mortality predominates.(50)

Manfred is condemned to the tragedy of a dual nature that resolves itself in a recognition of mortality.

Byron also feels that man is only a pawn in the hands of omnipotent spirits. Manfred lives at the whim of three destinies who chortle:

Our hands contain the hearts of men,  
 Our footsteps are their graves;  
 We only give to take again  
 The spirits of our slaves!(51)

Manfred comes to the similarly crushing conclusion that "We are the fools of time and terror: Days /Steal on us, and steal from us."(52)

Like Byron's fatalism, the Byronic hero-criminal finds its way into the heart of each of his major characters. Chew describes Manfred as "a man of mystery and crime."(53) He seeks the truth and is opposed by the doctrinaire Chamois-hunter and the Monk.(54) "The heart of the tragic idea," claims Chew, is "...the rebellion of the individual against the universal norm of things." Every Byronic protagonist displays

...this overweening assertion of will. The

jealousy of Faliero, the slothfulness of Sardanapalus, the 'sickly affection' of Jacopo Foscari, the dishonesty and sensuality of Siegendorf, the misanthropy and pride of Manfred, the soaring ambition of Cain, the rebellion of Anah and Aholibamah--all are assaults upon eternal law. (55)

Just as Manfred feels a struggle of humanity and immortality within his own soul, the struggle of good and evil in the hero-criminal assumes a similarly dual nature. As Chew explains,

Since the element of crime enters into the character of the tragic hero, the element of justice is never absent from the opposing force. Tragedy becomes thus an intestinal warfare of good with good. this is exactly the Byronic position--not a clearly defined representation of the conflict of Ormuzd with Ahriman, but a commingling of the elements of good and evil in both parties of the strife. (56)

Little could be more Romantic than Byron's expression of the conflicting natures of a divided and troubled soul--the kind of spirit that surfaces again and again in Byronic drama.

As Byron's protagonists reach their moments of

supreme testing, Byron concludes that the struggle, and not the evident outcome, ennobles the hero.

Sardanapalus, Myrrha and her lover, and Faliero all exhibit the triumph through suffering that marks the Byronic hero. Byron is confident in man's ability to transcend material defeat through moral or spiritual victory. (57)

Technically, Byron's plays suffer from his intense interest in the philosophical struggles of the protagonist. As the locus of the plays' action is internalized, the stageworthiness of the play decreases. Dramatic tension then takes the guise of conflicting emotions, and, as Byron feels of Shakespeare,

...the conflict is internal. The rottenness is not in the state of Denmark so much as in Hamlet's will; the witches are not objective ministers of destiny so much as the promptings of Macbeth's own soul. (58)

What Byron fails to realize is that Hamlet and Macbeth are not just stories about internal struggle. While he focuses on internalization, Byron ignores other, equally important, considerations: plot, stage action, and relationships between characters. Just as with those of the other Romantics, Byron's plays suffer from an internalization of conflict within characters. As plot



is obscured by sentiment, realistic dramatic constraints are submerged in interminable soliloquies and wearying explorations of motive. Though interesting literature, Manfred fails as drama. Manfred's failure is primarily technical in the sense that it does not adapt itself well to the stage. The long-winded mental ramblings and anguished self-study of the hero fail to hold an audience's interest. The action is mostly internal and the stage picture is consequently static. Similarly, all of Byron's plays suffer from technical faults resulting from Byron's lopsided attention to internal conflict rather than stage dynamics.

In 'regular' drama, the play begins either at, or before, a conflict for the protagonist. The play then proceeds to a resolution. Byron generally starts his plays after the conflict and forces the reader to accept the circumstances. Byron does this to preserve the unities; his effect is to deflate a good deal of potential dramatic tension. In good drama, exposition is usually through dialogue; Byron ignores this dictum. In Marino Faliero and The Two Foscari, Byron accedes to a two-scene dialogue between the protagonist and a confidant. Manfred explains his predicament through soliloquy. In Sardanapalus, Byron uses a superfluous opening soliloquy, and saves the exposition for later.

In Werner the dialogue between Werner and his wife is about facts of which they already know; Werner meditates aloud on all-too-familiar facts.(59) Generally, Byron's plays have no readily apparent and dramatically strong climax.(60) The Shakespearean method occasionally prepares the audience for the ending through foreshadowing. Byron ignores the potential for foreshadowing to increase dramatic interest. Except for Sardanapalus (the dream of Act IV), Byron's dramas reach a catastrophe so obvious that no warnings are necessary; only the inevitable takes place.(61)

These flaws signify the difficulty Byron had in writing drama. Byron's advantages include his rejection of Shakespeare, and his attempted escape from self-consciousness. Thematically, Byron's dramas reflect ideas present in his poetry and developed in his private life. What dooms Byron's plays like those of his fellow Romantics is a host of what should now be familiar flaws: the internalization of conflict, the awareness of self, the clumsiness of exposition, etc.

A cursory glance at the body of Byron's plays would seem to confirm that he fails at drama as utterly as the other poets. Byron operates by different motives, certainly; he makes himself unique by his rejection of Shakespeare and Romanticism and his desire to resurrect a

Classical order. His plays betray the disappointing fact that despite his rejection of Shakespeare and Romanticism he still labors under their yoke. Despite his awareness of crippling self-consciousness, Byron cannot seem to shake its power. Despite his preference for Classical order, he cannot completely resurrect a lost style. It would seem that Byron has failed. But there is one play I have not yet discussed--a play unique among Byronic plays, and indeed unique among all Romantic drama, in which the synthesis of Romanticism and drama succeeds--Cain.

Byron's Cain may well be the most important play of the Romantic Era, if only because it succeeds in a genre of total failure. Curiously, (because of its almost total neglect among scholars), Cain represents the apex of the Romantic dramatic movement. Cain is at the terminus of two parallel historical processes: the development of the Romantic hero and the progression of dramatic experiment. We can discern in Cain both the presence of Romantic ideals and the result of a dramatic development spanning centuries. Most remarkably, Cain is a drama that works.

Although Cain was followed by an epilogue, Heaven and Earth, the latter play is only fragmentary and thus I do not think that it deserves or can sustain the critical

attention I will give to Cain. Cain, the Byronic recreation of the story of Cain and Abel, shares many of the same Romantic notions of Byron's other plays. Cain shoulders a nameless guilt--what he calls "this mysterious, nameless sin" superficially identical to Manfred's.(62) Cain's guilt is at least explainable from the context of Adam's original sin. Like Manfred, Cain has a yearning spirit shackled by mortality. As Cain himself laments,

...I feel the weight  
Of daily toil, and constant thought: I look  
Around a world where I seem nothing, with  
Thoughts which arise within me, as if they  
Could master all things(63)

In Cain, the shackles are forged by a tyrant God similar to that of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. Lucifer tempts Cain by telling him the nobility of being one of many "Souls who dare use their immortality--/Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in /His everlasting face, and tell him that /His evil is not good!"(64) Cain, trapped in a cruel fate of God's making, sees no escape:

...I live,  
But live to die; and, living, see no thing  
To make death hateful, save an innate clinging,  
A loathsome, and yet all invincible

Instinct of life, which I abhor, as I

Despise myself, yet cannot overcome--

And so I live. Would I had never lived!(65)

Cain underscores his personal tragedy by loving those who must perish--his parents.(66) At the end of the play an Angel descends to mark Cain's brow and tells Cain that God has sealed Cain's tragedy and will not let Cain die.(67)

Lucifer points out that God's treachery has one good result:

One good gift has the fatal apple given--

Your reason--let it not be over-sway'd

By tyrannous threats to force you into faith

'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling:

Think and endure,--and form an inner world

In your own bosom--where the outward fails;

So shall you nearer be the spiritual

Nature, and war triumphant with your own.(68)

In other words, through reason Cain can reach spiritual self-consciousness. Self-consciousness can lead to something greater; as Lucifer explains, "It may be death leads to the highest knowledge; /And being of all things the sole thing certain, /At least leads to the surest science: therefore /The tree was true, though deadly."(69) Thus for Cain self-consciousness (which

crippled the other Romantic poets) is only a stepping stone to a more important discovery.

While the essence of Romanticism is at the thematic heart of Cain, the play can be seen as the final stage in a centuries-old progression of dramatic style. One biographer of Byron, Paul Trueblood, describes Cain as a metaphysical drama that draws on Genesis, Milton, medieval theater, and contemporary philosophical theories in its struggle of good and evil.(70) Though Byron titles Cain "a mystery," like the medieval mystery plays, "His myth, with its sense of cosmic vastness and incomprehensible Deity, is essentially modern."(71) Terry Otten confirms Byron's integration of old and new in a play that "contains modern, subjective matter within the context of known myth."(72) In the Preface to Marie Magdalena, Hebbel claims that Cain approaches modernity; as Otten writes,

...Hebbel argues that in Greek drama action is linear, moving directly along a straight line to a moral center, or Idea. Shakespearean drama, with its Protestant ethos, emancipated the individual to a much greater degree...As a consequence, we see Hamlet constantly interrupt plot by unrestrained introspection. The movement is more a zigzag than a straight line. Goethe later laid

the foundation for a truly modern drama in Faust, in which he located the dialectic directly in the Idea. The question is not when will the hero reach the moral end, the Idea, but how is he to discover it at all. Cain's modernity resides in the rejection of plot as "soul of the action"--the substance of the action is the intellectual and emotional intensification of Cain's attempt to construe an order within to replace decadence without. (73)

Unlike every other Romantic play I have discussed, Cain stands alone as good drama, and it represents the most successful answer to the Romantic problem. Both technically and thematically Byron forges a story that interests the reader and can conceivably be performed. Cain is not without problems; generally, however, Cain is simply better drama. The action moves more swiftly and intelligibly, Byron uses his secondary characters to greater effect, and Adah and Abel are good foils to Cain. Though we know the outcome of the tale, we are still fascinated by Lucifer's subtle and reasonable temptation of Cain, and the shocking and moving spectacle of Abel's death.

Cain holds a strong advantage over its counterparts in that Byron describes an historical event readily

familiar to any Western audience, unlike the historical events behind Sardanapalus or the non-history of Manfred or Werner. Byron's strength in his selection of a well-known story is his synthesis of an old story with new (Romantic) themes. As Otten describes this aspect, "Contrary to the scriptural dramas of the Middle Ages, which play upon the audience's familiarity with the story to reassert the Scripture's moral validity, Cain uses a common myth as a means of conveying a new morality." (74) We sympathize with Byron's Cain, a man trapped and asking questions of a merciless God; the crude and reprehensible Cain of the medieval morality plays invites only pious condemnation.

Byron achieves his most satisfying contribution to the solution of the Romantic dilemma through his handling of self-consciousness. Hitherto, Romantic playwrights suffered from a critical self-awareness that, combined with their idolization of Shakespeare, built for them an inescapable quandary of oppressed creativity. We know that Byron rejects Shakespeare as a model, and his other plays notwithstanding, Cain is free from Shakespearean echoes of technique or substance. Byron solves the problem of self-consciousness by moving self-awareness from the mind of the poet to the character. Otten mentions that Cain bears "the almost unbearable weight of



self-consciousness." (75) Byron frees his creativity by transferring that "almost unbearable weight" from the source of his creativity (his mind) to the object of his creation (his character). Thus, Byron avoids the trap of self-consciousness (which doomed the other Romantic plays) by recognizing the danger and taking steps to neutralize it.

Finally, Byron ensures his victory by creating on stage a situation of genuine dramatic tension and interest. The Romantics rejected a stage of interacting personalities, preferring instead to focus their attention on the inner struggles of one character. In Cain, Byron extends this effort one step further by splitting the warring factions of Cain's spirit into separate characters. Each character carries a discrete set of values which Cain must analyze and through which he must make his philosophical choices. Thus Cain's desire for liberation and knowledge becomes Lucifer, Cain's instinctive urge to please God becomes Adam, Cain's hesitation to shatter his tenuous security becomes Adah, and Cain's condemnation of self becomes Eve. In this respect, Byron's Cain becomes a link in the chain of philosophical development in that Byron's stage of multiple aspects of one personality forms the prototype of the modern theater of ideas, with its questioning of

accepted values and probing examination of self. Byron straddles two worlds: Romanticism and the modern age. Through Cain, Byron solves the Romantic dramatic problem and shapes the trends of future dramatic development. Ironically, while Cain was rejected by Byron's contemporaries because it looked forward to a future age, Cain is now ignored by a world ready for its lessons because it belongs chronologically to an era of dramatic failure.

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