

CONCLUSION

The romantic poets, including Shelley, tried to realise the complex and many sided literally form of drama in only a few of its facets — philosophy and didacticism, character and psychology, subjectivity and passion, poetry and artificial rhetoric, or mere mechanical imitation of older models. The resulting technical weaknesses, as we have seen, were many and varied. And they have made the admission of even the most ‘theatrical’ of these plays (like *The Cenci*, *Marino Faliero* and *De Montfort*) to the public stages an exceptional event. But on the other hand, even the most poetical and unstagable of these plays have a sound dramatic core. The main trouble with them is that their merits are generally isolated and not all-round. In one, simplicity and realism of language stand almost alone, in another, a commendable interest in the depths of psychology and characters is largely unaccompanied by other dramatic qualities, in the third, the presence of many such qualities is partially neutralised by a hatred for the stage and a desire to create as for emulation, and so on. In these plays, therefore the ‘literally’ and the ‘theatrical’ have not always become organically one; they merely co-exist. The kind, quality and degree of these elements vary from play to play. Consequently the plays are almost throughout good poetry, often moving dramas, and sometimes even effective theatre.

The dramatic wagons of these poets did not completely, or irreparably, break down under the unaccustomed loads they were made to bear. And many of them could be moved still further by their great creators. But was it worth their while? They were made to think that it was not. Their ambitions were largely irrelevant, for the prospect immediately before them was hardly enthusing: it was even positively repulsive. The spirit of the age had also worked from without, giving them a disgust, a dismay, a despondency, and even a positive

discouragement. This conjunction of the treatment melted out to them their dramatic achievement — unliterary theatre and literary closet drama.

However, in the wider context of English dramatic history, the achievement of the Romantic poets is not a freakish coldly; it is a part of the main current. *Wat Tyler, The Borderers, Remorse, Marino Faliero, The Sardanapalus, Cain, The Cenci* and *The Siege of Ancora* to mention only a few, were more intimately in touch with the thought and spirit of the age than the spectacular melodramas and silly farces which occupied the monopoly of stage. A part of the Romantic Movement, the literary drama of this age symbolised a return now to the classical and now to the Elizabethan spirit. A 'legitimate' child of the poet, the Romantic poetic play is an important link in the chain of dramatic tradition which connected Shakespeare with Keats. In its purposefulness, its emphasis on psychological analysis, its bringing the drama nearer to the ritualistic aspects of Christianity, its emphasis on reform and classical simplicity both in structure and style, its comparative disregard of the stage and its unconscious preference for modern techniques and development, — the closet drama of the Romantic Revival as a whole, and the Byronic drama in part, — forestall the modern poetic drama.

Prof. G. Wilson Knight has gone to the extent of regarding Byron's plays as 'pivotal'¹, an important link between the traditional and the modern; and even Prof. S. C. Chew² thinks so and also that the poetic plays of the Romantic period are as a whole 'more nearly in line with the time-spirit and more nearly of the traditions of the past 'than' the great body of romantic poetry.'³

The value of the closet dramas to biographers, critics and literary historians is inestimable. They are an important vein for a study of the Romantic movement and also of the works and personalities of their authors, whose most intimate dream, they sometimes

enshrine. It is well nigh impossible, for instance, to understand the early transition in words. *The Borderers*, and *Remorse* is an important document for a study of Coleridge's philosophy. Who can hope to grasp and appreciate part of Byron's Proteus-like personality without being fully acquainted with *Manfred*, *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus* and *Cain*? *The Cenci* is one of the most beautiful utterances of its author, and *Prometheus Unbound* is in many respects the highest water- mark of his achievements. The plays of Joanna Baille, W.S. Landor and T. H. Beddoes are a major part of their total poetic output, and study of these authors is almost synonymous with study of dramas. A thorough acquaintance with Romantic closet drama is, therefore, an alienable part of a study of the Romantic Movement.

Both a failure and achievement, the poetic drama of the Romantic Revival was a remarkable challenge. It was a disturbing challenge to the contemporary theatre, which haunted managers and actors of vision. It was a momentous challenge, almost the first of its kind, to the traditional dramatic theory itself — the challenge of the higher literary values in drama to the further ages, including our own. With our experimental stage and smaller theatres, our literary societies in universities and towns, our cultural gatherings, our cinema with its emphasis on the spoken word, there is no reason why we cannot meet this challenge.

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1. *The Golden Labyrinth*. G. Wilson Knight. p. 231.
2. *The Dramas of Lord Byron*. S. C. Chew. p. 30.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 26-27.

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