CHAPTER VI

Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant

Prometheus Unbound was the product of a mature mind and it has been hinted at in the preceding chapter on *The Cenci* that Shelley was slowly developing an objective attitude towards dramatic writings. His thought processes being more mature now and perhaps on Keats's advice he was becoming more conscious about the realities of life and their transcription to art. *Triumph of Life* is his last work and perhaps the best proof of maturity. S. C. Chew and Richard D. Attick have described the years 1812 -1818 as 'transitional'.[1] Shelley's poem *Episychidion* and the play *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Swellfoot the Tyrant* are also handy evidences of this 'transition'.

The play was composed in August 1820, two years before the poet's death. Grunting of Pigs at the Baths of San Guilliano inspired him to project in Mrs. Shelly's words, a 'political satirical drama on the circumstances of the day, to which the pigs would survey as — chorus'.

This play is the last and the longest of Shelly's political poems and a dramatic burlesque on George IV and the Liverpool administration. The chorus of frogs in Aristophanes was obviously in his mind. The play recalls the satiric comedies of Aristophanes especially the Chorus in frogs, which appears to be Shelley's model. By 'the circumstances of the day'; Mrs. Shelley definitely means the Caroline affairs. The Prince of Wales, who later became King George IV, married Princess Caroline of Brunswick and the scandal around the Queen Caroline is the main episode of the drama.

It will be relevant to sketch here the historical background that Shelley obviously drew upon. As mentioned earlier, George IV, the Prince of Wales at that time has married Caroline of Brunswick, a German princess in 1795. The Prince's main aim was to secure through the legally married wife, a large estate so that he could pay off the loans he incurred, due to his habit of gambling. He married in the mean time secretly and a large number of women were there in his keeping. When faced with a conspiracy to remove her, Caroline thought it wise to live apart from the King in a foreign country but George did not stop scheming against her and sent spies to the continent to collect information about her fast life. A commission was found to clinch evidence against her. The Milan Commission, as the committee of enquiry was known, secured the services of some dismissed servants of the Queen (Sir John Loch was the chairman of the committee, Col. Browne and Cook and Powell, two lawyers, were the members — all these so called important persons knew the art of being useful to the influential people.) In the mean time, when the old King died, the Queen Caroline thought the time was opportune to return and claim her rights as Queen.

A tussle between the king and the Queen started in regard to the rightful claims of Caroline and as a result, confusion was worst confounded. Naturally, Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister, was on the side of the King, but also naturally, the people on the whole supported the cause of the Queen. Though the people had no faith in the Queen's character, they were nevertheless sure about the King's shady activities. When the Queen was coming to London, the cheering crowd turned her journey into a victorious procession, women in the crowd shouting, 'God bless her' and men pulling her carriage through the streets, decorated with flags.

In the mean time, the 'green bag' was laid by Castlereagh before the House of Commons and by Liverpool, before the House of Lords. On June 7, Castlereagh proposed the establishment of a secret committee to investigate the evidence against the Queen. On July 8,

1820, Lord Liverpool with the help of a newly introduced Bill of Pains and Penalties, tried its reading which was passed with a slender majority of nine and that too after prolonged deliberations, which in effect constituted the Queen's trial. Taking this as his defeat and in the face of historic public enthusiasm for the Queen, Lord Liverpool dropped the bill. (But the Queen died next year, on August 7, 1821.) Though the play is partly a parody of the Greek Drama, it is also a satire on the Queen's trial.

However, the contemporary reference in general (among who were Sir Francis Burdett, Sir William Corbett and *The Examiner*) defended the Queen. Political satirists and Cartoonists also exploited the situation. In many of the pamphlets were found the same dramatic personnel — a rat, a leech, and the same paraphernalia — the green bag and swine — as we find in *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. However, it is not known whether Shelley saw it in Italy and knew of them before composing his play.

Newman I White argues that Shelley saw two cartoons on the green bag theme. These could either have been sent to him, by some friend, or been shown to him by his English friends in Italy. The same theme confirmed to inspire many other poets, for several years. For instance, Keats wrote *The Cap and the Bells.*

Like other reformers, Shelley was also of the opinion that the issue was no longer a personal one. But he was not a supporter of the Queen and unlike some others, he only hoped that the circumstances of the Queen might advance the cause of parliamentary reform: 'My only hope is that the mistake into which the ministers have fallen, will precipitate them into ruin.' [5]

Shelley made use of *The Examiner* of June 11 in which Castlereagh's explanations of administrative positions about the claim of the Queen were published. As the people had the suspicion about the minister's honesty, Castlereagh suggested the formation of a secret committee to investigate the evidence against the Queen. The Queen's stance of appealing to the judgment of the lowest rungs of society was criticised by Castleregh. He thought that her method of sucking justice through people would only aggravate the people's discontent against the Government at Peterloo massacre. The influential media organ *The Examiner* took the side of the Queen. The Queen, emboldened by the support of *The Examiner*, and the defence by Sir Francis Burdett, declared 'I proudly retort your charges upon yourself ... I defy you.'[6]

Among the reformers who came forward to defend the Queen was William Corbett whose *Political Register*, forcefully gives a vivid description of the case. Pamphlets were distributed, William Hone being there behind all this. As we find in *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, here also as dramatic personnel figured a rat, a leech and the like, the green bag and swine.

Interestingly, immediately after the sale of only seven copies, the rest of the issues of *Swellfoot the Tyrant* were burnt. More interestingly, this was done by the overzealous adheres of the dictates issued by the society for the suppression of vice. *

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* Caricaturing royal couple inspired many productions of the similar kind, many years before Shelley wrote the poem, Keats' *The Cap and the Bell* was also inspired by the affair. But it is not known whether Shelley was acquainted with it and inspired by any of them, except a Kit titled *A New Catechism*. We may remember here also Burke's Survive multitude and the theme of Spencer's pigs' meat.

PART II

The outline of the story is as follows: The King of Thebes, the Swellfoot, rules over a nation of pigs. He is presently worried about the spread of famine in the kingdom, and especially about the impending cut in the supply of bacon for his own feasts. In the meantime Tournine, the Queen returns, and the swinish population, acclaim her, though, according to Mammon's proposal, she is to be tried to prove her innocence. She is to face a shower of supernatural elements showered on her head from the green bag. But snatching away the bag, she poured the elements on the king and his court and they are immediately transformed into filthy and ugly animals. Then something more interesting happens. As the image of the famine on the alter goes deep down into the earth, a Minotaur rises. The Queen amidst the cheers of the pigs rides upon the Minotaur and chases her opponents.

With the help of these slender threads of non- dramatic story Shelley wove a satirical play. The characters are obviously allegorical. *

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* On the authority of N.I. White we can interpret the following major allegorical characters. Swellfoot (George IV), Iona Taurina (Queen Caroline), Minotaur (John Bull), Swine (People), Purganax (Castlereagh), Lactones (Wellington), Datry (Eldon), Mammon (Lord Liverpool), Leech (Vice Chancellor Leech), Rat (William Cooke) and Gadfly (Lt. Col, Browne).

In the very opening scene Shelley's moral zeal is made clear — he exposes in a brutal burlesque style the horribly miserable existence of the exploited slum dwellers. We find Swellfoot worshipping in the temple of Famine. Meanwhile, a chorus of swine begins shouting — he was not aware of their presence before:

Semichorus : Alas ! The pigs are an unhappy nation!

Now if your Majesty would have our bristles

To bind your mortar with, or fill our Colons

With rich blood, or make brawn out of our gristles,

In policy — ask else your royal solons –

You ought to give us hogwash and clean straw —

And sties well thatched; besides it is the law!

Swellfoot : This is sedition, and rank blasphemy!

Ho! There, my guards! (Act I, Sc. I, ll. 60 – 68)

A guard now brings Solomon along with problem of the court, Moses, the sow-gelder, and Zephania, the hog butcher (representing Malthus and his followers, advocating the sterilization of the poor). Pigs are driven out and Mammon, 'the Arch Priest', and Purganax, 'Chief of the Council of the Wizards' appear. The king is warned about an impending disaster by Purganax:

There is something rotten in us — for the level

Of the state slopes, its very base topple,

The boldest turn their backs upon themselves!

(Act I, Sc. I, ll. 99-101)

Mammon does not seem to be concerned:

Why, what's the matter, my dear fellow, now?

Do the troops mutiny? Decimate same regiments;

Does money fail? Come to my mint, –coin paper.

(Act I, Sc. I. ll. 102-104)

But the situation is far from simple. That an oracle 'was spoken by Mammon' is not remembered by him. The oracle explained that the Queen would return, the country would have to choose between 'reform or civil war'. Therefore, the Queen has to be kept away by any means, fair or foul. Purganax now summons a leech, a gadfly and a rat (i.e. the Milan Commission of Leech, Cooke and Browne).

The Gadfly sings:

I have hummed her and drummed her

From place to place, till at last I have dumbed her,

Hum! hum! hum! (Act I, Sc. I, ll.258-260)

The leech more forcefully states:

I will suck

Blood or muck!

The disease of the state is a plethora

Who so fit to reduce it as I?

(Act I, Sc. I, ll. 261-264)

The singing is disrupted by the sudden announcement for the Swellfoot about the return of the Queen. Panic is writ large on his face. General Lactones, the Duke of

Wellington, with whom Castlereagh represented the king, while negotiating with the Queen's advisers, is summoned; Dakry, Lord Eldon the Lord Chancellor also comes with him. He sheds crocodile tears;

> And how I Loved the Queen! — and then I wept
>
> With the pathos of my own eloquence.
>
> (Act I, Sc. I, ll. 332-333)

Now scheming Mammon offers a venomous green bag, a test trap, collected by the leech, the gadfly and the rat. Purganax's name is proposed for persuading the pigs of the 'public sty' (the House of Commons) to accept the bag as containing innocuous things, and, therefore, it can be poured over the Queen.

The second act shows at the beginning Purganax praising the boars (members of the house) for the glories of their country. If his reasons are to be taken seriously, all is there well on all fronts, except the poverty suffered by the lower classes. But he thinks that in near future their condition will improve. A brilliant piece of parody in Purganax's speech turns it into parliamentary oration:

> Grant me your patience, Gentleman and Boars,
>
> Ye, by whose patience, under public burthens.
>
> The glorious constitution of these sties
>
> Subsists, and shall subsist.
>
> (Act II, Sc. I, ll. 1-4)

He warns that opposition would be treated mercilessly:

> Those impious pigs who, by frequent squeaks, have dared impugn.
>
> The settled Swellfoot system, or to make

irreverent mockery of the genuflexions

Inculcated by the arch-priest, have been whipped.

Into a loyal and an orthodox whine.

(Act II, Sc. I, ll. 25-30)

Then the suspected moral degradation of the Queen is hinted at:

But then he fears the morals of the Swine;

The sows especially, and what effect

It might produce upon the purity and

Religion Of the rising generation

Of Sucking-Pigs, if it could be suspected

That queen Iona –

(Act II, Sc. I, ll. 51-56)

At the same time he clearly points out that he just wants to be fair to the Queen and therefore, wants to pour out a magic fluid from the green bag which will prove if one is guilty or not. 'An honourable boar' points out that the particular colour is an evil one:

Oh! No GREEN BAGS! Jealousy's eyes are green,

Scorpions are green and water-snakes and efts,

And verdigris, and–

Pat comes a retort from Purganax:-

Honourable Swine,

In piggish souls can prepossessions reign?

Allow me to remind you, grass is green —

All flesh is grass; no becon but is flesh —

Ye are but becon.

(Act II, Sc. I. ll. 76-80)

In the meanwhile pigs break in and Purganax is confused:-

Gods! What would ye be at?

(Act II, Sc. I, l. 124)

The response of the Chorus is significant:

The oracle is now about to be

Fulfilled by circumvolving destiny:

Which says: 'Thebes, choose reform or civil war,

When through your streets, instead of hare with dogs,

A CONSORT QUEEN shall hunt a KING with Hogs,

Riding upon the IONIAN MINOTAUR.'

(Act II, Sc. I, ll. 151-156)

Now, to the relief of PURGANAX, the Queen herself enters and agrees to the test of the green bag:

Lord PURGANAX, I do commit myself

Into your custody, and am prepared

To stand the test, whatever it may be,

(Act. II, Sc. I, ll. 180-182)

Full of confidence in her victory, she says in an aside:

I, most content of all,

Know that my foes even thus prepare their fall!

(Act II, Sc. I, ll. 190-191)

Scene II of this act sounds more serious. In the earlier scenes Shelley mainly wanted to expose the duplicity and unscrupulousness of the Tories. Now his theme as in *A Philosophical View of Reform* in the final scene has taken on a grimmer tone. It is as if England faces the alternative of despotism or revolution. A bitter psychologically acute picture of the autocratic ruling class, with its self-centered, cynical smugness, and its hard brutality is pointed by the opening chorus of the priests of Famine.

The second scene opens thus with the chorus of priests:

Goddess bare, and gaunt, and pale,

Empress of the world, all hail!

What though Cretans old called thee

City crested Cybele?

We call thee FAMINE;

Goddess of fasts and feasts, starving and cramming!

Through thee, for emperors, kings, and priests and lords

Who rule by viziers, sceptres, bank notes, words,

The earth poured forth its plenteous fruits,

Corn, wool, linen, flesh and roots —

Those who consume these fruits through thee grow fat,

Those who produce fruits through thee grow lean,

Whatever change takes place,

Oh stick to that;

And let things be as they have ever been;

(Act II, Sc. IV, ll. 1-14)

We find when the Swellfoot and his companions are taking part in the feast; the swine (the common people) too, come and thank Famine. But they do not thank the Goddess for the continuance of the rule as the priests do; they rather think that the Queen represents the force that will help them to revolt against the ruling power:

Hail to thee, hail to thee, Famine;

Thy throne is on blood, and thy robe is of rags;

Thou devil which livest on damning;

Saint of new churches, and cants, and GREEN BAGS,

Till in pity and terror thou risest

Confounding the schemes of the wisest;

When thou liftest thy skeleton form,

When the leaves and the skulls roll about,

We will greet thee — the voice of a storm

Would be lost in our terrible shout!

(Act II, Sc. II. ll. 42 - 51)

His speech reminds us of the vision of Thomas Spence in his constitution of a perfect commonwealth.[8]

Liberty now approaches the alter of Famine and accuses the Queen of inactivity and passivity:

…by thy dread self, O Famine!

I charge thee! When thou wake the multitude,

Thou lead them not upon the paths of blood.

The earth did never mean her foison

For those who crown life's cup with poison

Of fanatic rage and meaningless revenge —

But for these radiant spirits, who are still.

The standard bearers in the van of change,

Be they th' appointed stewards, to fill.

The lap of Pain, and To Be and Age;–

Remit, O Queen! Thy accustomed rage!

Be what thou art not! In voice faint and low

Freedom calls Famine, – her eternal foe

To brief alliance, hollow truce, – Rise now!

(Act I, Sc. II, ll. 89 -102)

Shelley here sings of the glory of Liberty as he does near the end of the Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*. Some critics think that for this Liberty-Famine scene Shelley was indebted to the conclusion of the young Coleridge's *Letter of Liberty to her Dear Friend Famine in Tthe Conscioness ad Populum* (VO1.I, 1795). *

Coleridge argues that unless the rulers of England adopt more liberal policies, they would have to face overwhelming forces of revolution generated by economic distress (famine) of the people.[9]

The tone of this Famine-Liberty scene is now turned into a burlesque. A dramatic twist is given to the scene when the Queen suddenly snatches the Green Bag and empties it over 'her enemies' who are instantly changed into 'a number of filthy and ugly animals' and who then 'rush out of the temple.'

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* *The Concioness* published in 1795 supplied Shelley with some other suggestions. The stage directions read:

'A magnificent Temple, built of thigh bones and death's heads, and tiled with scalps' and 'the interior of the Temple of Famine, the statue of the Goddess, a skeleton clothed in parti-coloured rags, seated upon a heap of skulls and leaves intermingled.' These seem to have been suggested by Coleridge's 'temple of despotism' which 'like that of Tescalipoca, the Mexican deity, is built of human skulls, and cemented with human blood.' Some characteristics of Famine-goddess of fasts and feasts — starving and cramming — may be derived from *The Concioness*:

They (the ruling class) deprecated the anger of Heaven by a Fast and after that a treat feasts for the rich and their friends... usual scanty morsel to the poor.[10]

After this the pigs are transformed into Bulls and then the image of Famine disappears down into the earth and a Minotaur (the figure of John Bull) arises:

Minotour: My name's John Bull; I am a famous hunter,

And can leap any gate in all Boetia,

Even the palings of the royal park,

Or double ditch about the new enclosures;

And if Your Majesty will deign to mount me,

At least till you have hunted down your game,

I will not throw you.

(Act II. Sc. ii, ll. 109 -115)

Iona rides on the Minotaur and becomes ready to charge out with all the pigs metamorphosed into Bulls:

Wake all the dewy woods with jingling music.

Give them no law (are they not beasts of blood)?

But such as they gave you.

(Act II. Sc. ii, ll.124-126)

She, along with the bulls, then goes out of the Temple to pursue Swell foot and his companions.

The final scene thus represents Shelley's hope that the existing tyrannical rule will be reformed and the real fact behind the testimony of the lying witnesses of the Milan Commission will be exposed.

PART III

We have already observed that all the major characters of *Oedipus Tyrannus* are allegorical. As this is a short play, there is not much opportunity of elaborate characterization. However, this much can be said at least that the King is a traditional tyrant who exploits the common mass. Mammon and Purganax are his two instruments of evil execution. As in most of his plays, here also Shelley has tied to expose a conflict between good and evil out of which revolution and consequent reformation come out. Here the Queen stands up as the rebel against the tyrannical rule of the King and she allegorises to some extent Shelley's moral mission. However, at the same time, it must be kept in mind that here Shelley expresses his own moral concern at his best through the speech of liberty:

> O famine!
>
> I charge thee! when thou wake the multitude,
>
> Thou lead them not upon the paths of blood.
>
> The earth did never mean her foison
>
> For those who crown life's cup with poison.
>
> Of fanatic rage and meaningless revenge – (Act I, Sc. II, ll. 89-102)

The allegorical portrayals were responsible after the play not being unpopular. As usual with the Romantic playwrights, stage managers and directors have not liked the play's extravagant speeches, outrageous characters and revolting settings. The form is obviously

classical, but the topicality of the content makes the play worth considering. But in spite of some sort of realism, it fails to deliver the goods, despite Shelley's resolution to be strictly objective 'henceforth' in his attempts at drama- writing. It can also be considered as a product of mature mind, which shows that Shelley was slowly developing an impersonal and realistic view of the world around. We believe that the play's dramatic energy is greater than *The Cenci*. Naturally, Shelley's 'familiarity with the literature of a national scandal' has surprised many. [11]

However, this drama at least demonstrates again, as did the poem *Peter Bell the Third,* how Shelley watched developments in England, not only from the point of view of an idealist but also as a person who was fully aware of the sordid realities around, and who, being a sensitive rebel, suffered moral anxieties and was disturbed by the age-old problem of finding out proper means to eradicate evil from the world.

We have tried to make it clear in our foregoing discussion that Shelley was deeply hurt by the moral degradation in the activities of the Castlereaghs and Wellingtons whose administrative policy made the people suffer from war, poverty, oppression and exploitation, that the poet wanted to eradicate all these entirely from the country. His ideas were fundamentally radical as they were in *The Masque of Anarchy*. He may not have wanted to abolish the existing administrative structure for the present. He perhaps hopes that the enlightened leaders of thought and reformers would one day be able to bring in a new era guided by the principles of love and justice. Some have described this reforming zeal of Shelley as repeated in this play as 'Promethean egalitarianism.'[12] It was an intolerable state of things to Shelley that common mass of people is dictatorially ruled over by a corrupt society and the human potential which had the capacity to love and create aesthetic and human surroundings worth living is being wasted. True, this picture of creative human potential going in waste and conflicts between the upper class and the exploited mass is not to be

found in Hazlitt, Byron or Hunt– to name three contemporary Romantic writers– who could never think that inequality could ever be eliminated as this is ingrained in human nature. Shelley's fellow romanticists may also think that ultimately monarchism would vanish, yet they could not help thinking that Shelley's radical humanism and idealism were a sort of

Utopian dream. But the fact remains that by the side of savage criticism and hatred for the ruling class there is also a touch of compassion and a dream of a better would, though this dream was laughed over by Byron and others. May we challenge Byron and his like to show any where in the literature of the age, *Don Juan* included, this kind of in-depth study of the harsh reality, hellish human misery and brutality and the potential force of creative processes which would one day bring in a golden age in its true sense.

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