

SHELLEY'S "ALASTOR" AND ROMANTIC DRAMA

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"Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude" is not the most popular of Shelley's poems, but among critics it apparently occupies the place of a favorite problem child. It is Shelley's earliest long poem after "Queen Mab," and although it exhibits a remarkable increase in poetic power in the two years between the poems, it also presents new and extraordinary problems, the solution of which challenges the ingenuity, and sometimes the patience, of its critics.

The central problem faced by these critics is that of determining just what kind of performance it is. Clearly intended as a major statement of some sort—with a preface by the poet and in the later editions a note by Mrs. Shelley—the poem deals with readily identifiable, and in some cases typically Shelleyan, themes. But these themes are presented in a strange and apparently disunified form, so that the hardest questions to answer are: what sort of poem is it, and what does it say? In attempting to answer these questions critics have discovered at least two major difficulties which complicate, if indeed they do not cause, the central interpretative problem. The first of these is an alleged contradiction between the poem itself and Shelley's statements about the poem in his preface. The second is a supposed inconsistency between the events of the narrative and Shelley's attitude toward the central character participating in these events.

The preface is said to be in conflict with the poem on two issues: in suggesting a single purpose for the poem, and in intimating that a curse motif informs the poem. Shelley is said to have erred when he implied that his poem has a single purpose, for manifestly the poem answers to four nearly distinct purposes, a characteristic explained by the fact that Shelley was a confused poet, not sure about what he was writing in the heat of composition.¹ One may infer that Shelley's error in the preface is explained by his further inability to interpret what he had done when the work was finished. This explanation—if it affords any satisfaction at all—can hardly account for the second alleged inconsistency. Shelley implies, it is said, in the second paragraph of his preface, that a curse motif is

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¹ Raymond D. Havens, "Shelley's Alastor," *PMLA*, XLV (1930), 1098-1115. His evidence for Shelley's "confusion" is Shelley's own account of his *modus scribendi* to Godwin in a letter of February 24, 1812 (p. 1106).

at work in the poem, whereas the poem itself does not reveal such a motif. The first paragraph of the preface, furthermore, does not bear out the implication of the second, thereby betraying still another inconsistency within the preface itself. The title, which does suggest a curse motif, was composed, not by Shelley, but by Thomas Love Peacock, and Shelley was apparently forced to write the second paragraph to account for his adopting the title.² In addition, Shelley insists in the preface and early in the poem that the central figure, the Poet, deserves punishment, whereas the concluding lines of the poem contain extraordinary praise of the Poet, praise so completely unqualified as to obscure or negate this earlier judgment.³

What this complex of charges against the poem suggests is that, if Shelley was not himself hopelessly confused indeed, the methods of modern criticism have not yet been able to account for the value of the poem. In general, criticism when it is fair asks first what a poet is trying to accomplish in his poem, and second how well he has succeeded. The charges against "Alastor" proceed from the critics' discovery that Shelley was not sure what he was trying to accomplish, that success was therefore impossible. Perhaps a restoration of the poem can best be achieved, then, by assuming that the poem is a success, and by deducing from it just what it succeeds in doing.

The charge, for example, that Shelley's attitude toward the central figure is inconsistent, can only be made on the assumption that Shelley wanted *either* to assert that the Poet is "wrong," or to hold him up as a superior man. This restriction of Shelley's purpose ignores the fact that Western literature is filled with "tragic heroes," superior men who do something wrong;⁴ and this reflection is the first indication of Shelley's real intention in writing "Alastor."

I believe that "Alastor" is an early attempt by Shelley to bring within the scope of his own Romantic poetics the tradition of European drama. Shelley's later efforts in this direction are well recognized as perhaps the nearest thing to successful Romantic drama: his attempt to revitalize Elizabethan tragedy in *The Cenci*, and his attempt to transplant continental philosophical-drama in *Prome-*

² Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), pp. 42, 45. A. M. D. Hughes also concludes that the preface and the poem are inconsistent in "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude," *Modern Language Review*, XLIII (1948), 465-70.

³ Frederick L. Jones, "The Inconsistency of Shelley's *Alastor*," *ELH*, XIII (1946), 291-98. At least two critics have regarded the poem as consistent: Evan K. Gibson, "Alastor: a Reinterpretation," *PMLA*, LXII (1947), 1022-45; and Albert Gerard, "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solipsism," *Philological Quarterly*, XXXIII (1954), 164-77.

⁴ Gibson refers to the "tragedy" of the poem (p. 1027), and Gerard suggests that the poem is "cathartic" (p. 165), and that the Poet's "sin" is a "tragic guilt of ignorance" (pp. 175ff).

theus Unbound. His consideration of the drama from a thoroughly Romantic position in his *Defence of Poetry* is a third such effort, different of course in kind. I will try to show that "Alastor" is Shelley's fourth and earliest effort to incorporate the drama within his own lyrical poetic impulse.

"Alastor," like *Prometheus* but perhaps not so consciously, is organized around a classical myth: the myth of the unloving young man who is destroyed by love in a perverted form. Euripides tells the story in the *Hippolytus* of a young man's worship of Diana to the neglect of Venus, and how it results in his punishment by Venus through an incestuous love kindled in his step-mother, Phaedra. Driven by her passion and its accompanying resentment at Hippolytus' refusals, Phaedra provokes her husband and Hippolytus' father, Theseus, to execute his son. In Seneca's play, titled either *Hippolytus* or *Phaedra*, there is a scene in which Phaedra herself reveals her love (a direct confrontation apparently too horrible for the Greek audience) as well as much greater emphasis on the ravages which her unnatural love makes in Phaedra. It is this last aspect of the traditional story which clearly predominates in Racine's version, so clearly that perhaps only the story remains, and very little of its mythical import. O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* seems to restore or rework the myth at the same time that nearly every aspect of the story is changed. Abbie Putnam Cabot, the female component, is the central character. She dishonors love by insincerely performing its rites with her step-son, Eben, in order to inherit his father's property. She is led to murder the infant born of this illicit union when genuine and irresistible love for Eben makes her resent his repudiation. In every case the elements of the myth, whatever their order and emphasis, are the same: a failure to honor love, or its spirit, or its goddess; an unnatural love; the death of an innocent person; and a sense of justice or necessity in the relationship among the other elements, religious in Euripides and Seneca, ethical in Racine, ironic in O'Neill.

In Shelley's version, "Alastor," the central figure is a solitary who fails to identify himself through love with humanity as a whole. Accordingly, the spirit of human love sends him a vision—an ideal mate constructed from the qualities, potentialities, and requirements of his own nature. The Poet thereafter searches for the prototype of this vision throughout the world, finally seeking union with her in death. The meaning of the myth here is not far from that in the Euripides version: natural love denied will be revenged. It is love of humanity as a whole, however, that Shelley expects of us, and he emphasizes his condemnation of spiritual solitude by extraordinary poetic condensation. The terrors of unnatural love, which Euripides, Seneca, and Racine assign to another person, the

Phaedra figure, Shelley attaches to the hero himself; the hero dies by his own deluded will, and not by the intervention of a Theseus; and he remains all the while the innocent victim.

If we consider the poem, then, as a typically Romantic effort to combine the lyric and dramatic forms, with a tragic myth and a tragic hero, the problems of "Alastor" can be resolved in this way. First, the organization around a single purpose which Shelley claims for the poem in his preface is now borne out by the poem itself. Whatever secondary purposes he may have intended are subordinated to a clear organizing and unifying principle, the Hippolytus myth. The alleged confusion in Shelley's mind as he wrote is actually nothing more than the reflection of his own doctrine in the *Defence* that true poetry comes unbidden and unconsciously to the poet. The opening lines of "Alastor" clearly anticipate—as in a dramatic chorus—the poem's ending, thereby revealing that at some point in the composition, most probably at the beginning, Shelley had a clear vision of the whole work. The so-called curse motif of the second paragraph of the preface is actually present in the myth, and consequently in the poem, and by implication in the first paragraph of the preface. In adopting Peacock's title, then, Shelley was only carrying out his original and single concept of the poem.

The problem of the inconsistency of the Poet's "sin" and Shelley's attitude toward him arises, as I have suggested, from the dramatic character of the poem. The Poet's sin is, as Shelley says in the preface, a "generous error," or, as we might say, a tragic mistake. The praise of the Poet at the end is clearly intended to evoke the traditional tragic response of *pity*, and the statement in the preface that the poem "is not barren of instruction to actual men" justifies the assumption that we are also expected to feel tragic *fear*.

Certain peculiar accidents seem to carry over from Seneca's drama into Shelley's narrative, accidents which suggest that the Roman play was influential in the composition of "Alastor" in more ways than as the means by which Shelley came to know the Hippolytus myth. Although Shelley's hero could never be a hunter, for example, since hunters are on the Shelleyan black-list of inhumane and savage villains, the association of the hero with Diana is preserved in Shelley's poem by numerous references to two of Diana's provinces: the moon and the secret places of the earth. The peculiar fact that "youthful maidens" called the Poet "false names / Brother and friend" (11. 266-69) seems to echo the scene in which Seneca's Phaedra asks Hippolytus to call her "sister." Even the Poet's meeting with the swan and his observation, in the conventional way, that his own voice is "far sweeter than thy dying notes," (1. 286) suggests the tribute which Seneca's chorus pays to Jupiter, that he has "dulcior vocem moriente cygno." These similarities are insuffi-

cient to justify the attribution of an influence of Seneca on Shelley, although they are interesting in themselves, and we know from Mrs. Shelley's notes to the "Early Poems" that Shelley was reading Seneca about the time he wrote "Alastor." Yet while random parallels such as these do not prove by any means that "Alastor" is based on Seneca's *Hippolytus*, if the identity of the myth in both works is recognized, the occasional echoing of Seneca may help to solve incidental problems in Shelley's poem.

The only real evidence that Shelley's poem is an "Hippolytus-poem" is the poem itself, and the importance of recognizing the operation of the myth in the poem is chiefly that the major problems of interpretation can be solved in this way. It is also significant, however, that we find Shelley trying so early in his career to enlarge the formal possibilities of literature in the Romantic spirit by combining lyric and dramatic virtues.

