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978-0-521-76711-8 - Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley

Reeve Parker

Excerpt

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Introduction: “Prowling out for dark employments”

The sustained readings offered in *Romantic Tragedies* make the case for substantial – and hitherto largely unappreciated – aspects of poetic power and dramaturgic finesse in four verse tragedies written by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. All were originally intended for performance in the licensed venues of Drury Lane or Covent Garden, though only one was actually staged. Each experiments boldly with the aesthetics of dramatic performance, drawing on – and challenging – inherited traditions. Each also undertakes to address and thereby influence momentous public issues in England’s prolonged experience of social and political conflict during the French Revolution and its post-Napoleonic Regency aftermath. Bound up with those experiments and issues are significant traces of the playwrights’ passionately driven and deeply fraught personal relations, fired by ambition, admiration, rivalry, and even revenge. And each play, I argue, depends crucially on an essential effect of tragic drama: uncertainty.

This brief Introduction serves in part to acknowledge the peculiar proportions of what follows. Part I consists of four chapters on the “Early Version” of *The Borderers*, the still seldom read and rarely performed tragedy that Wordsworth wrote before he became the celebrated lyric and narrative poet readers today know. Part II consists of three chapters, the first two on *Osorio* and *Remorse*, the versions (fifteen years apart) of the tragedy Coleridge wrote, the first before he became the plethora of other things he’s famous for having been, and the second in the troubled wake of a rupture in his relation to Wordsworth. The final chapter focuses on *The Cenci*, the tragedy Shelley wrote in Italy during the *annus mirabilis* that produced, among other things, the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*. Of these tragedies, only *Remorse* was staged during the author’s lifetime – at Drury Lane in 1813 and at prominent venues elsewhere in Britain and America – a longer run with arguably greater public success than that of any other new tragedy in the decades we know as the Romantic period.

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The somewhat haphazard blend of close aesthetic reading with biographical and historical contextualization that follows leads me to conclusions that both reinforce and resist work by others on these tragedies. I think particularly here of arguments in William Jewett's *Fatal Autonomy* (1997), Alan Richardson's *A Mental Theater* (1988), Julie Carlson's *In the Theatre of Romanticism* (1994), Sophie Thomas's *Romanticism and Visuality* (2008), and, with particular regard to Shelley's tragedy, Stuart Curran's *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (1970) and *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis* (1975), and Michael Simpson's *Closet Performances* (1998). Significantly, a large number of impressive books and essays published in the last fifteen years or so have focused on the works of other, contemporary playwrights – especially women – and their reception rather than on these tragedies by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. I think specifically of the substantial body of distinguished work by Catherine Burroughs, Jeffrey Cox, and Susan Bennett on Joanna Baillie; by Julie Carlson on Baillie and Elizabeth Inchbald; by Daniel O'Quinn on Inchbald and Mariana Starke; by Ellen Donkin on seven women playwrights; by Jane Moody on “illegitimate” theater; and by John Golder and Susan Maslan on drama performed in Paris during the French Revolution. Their work has been instrumental in broadening and deepening awareness of matters concerning both gender and social and national politics in plays written for staging in public or private venues or for private reading. Many of their emphases and their insights in effect challenge aspects of what I offer here. I hope this will invite other readers all the more to sift the possibilities, and to value the uncertainties that such differing or even opposing readings generate.

The preponderance of attention given to *The Borderers* reflects my fascination with its peculiar, equivocal centrality in Wordsworth's verse writing in 1796–97, though drama was the road not taken after 1797 in his public career as a poet – arguably not taken largely for political reasons themselves bound up with personal circumstances. The far from solitary recluse of Grasmere who began to emerge three years later with the publication of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) was hardly in the offing in the mid-1790s. Financial need and career anxiety, as well as gathering uncertainties about employment, family, and his relation to Annette Vallon and their daughter in Orléans – in the context of England's ongoing war with France – led him and his sister Dorothy to Dorset, and eventually, in 1797, to Alfoxden (and nearby Coleridge) in Somerset. Given his earlier experience of theater in Cambridge and London in the late 1780s and early 1790s and (as I argue in Chapters 2

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and 3) in revolutionary Paris in late 1792, and given, as so many historians have emphasized, theater's prominent role in public life, the imagined road for *The Borderers* from Somerset to London's theaters in 1797 must have had – as a solution to lack of funds and the wish for political influence – alluring if not fantastic appeal. The trick would be to disguise its political bearings by setting the tragedy back in “the reign of Henry III” on the “Borders of England and Scotland.”

Overall, the four chapters of Part I focus on what I see as significant aspects of language and dramaturgy in *The Borderers* largely overlooked by readings that center chiefly on the figure of the villainous Rivers. In the first chapter, exploring the dynamics of narrative and what I call “usurpation,” my prompt is Wordsworth's Joanna Baillie-like remark late in life to Isabella Fenwick about the “care” that he had “almost exclusively given to the passions and the characters, & the position in which the persons in the Drama stood relatively to each other, that the reader . . . might be moved & to a degree instructed by lights penetrating somewhat into the depths of our Nature.”¹ Reflecting this emphasis in the first scene of the play is the “position” of blind Herbert in relation to his daughter Matilda as he recalls their experience years earlier at the battle of Antioch during his ill-fated campaign as a Crusader. Herbert's tale of having saved her in infancy at the blazing gates of the city but becoming blind in the process breeds in her a grateful passion both for hearing the tale repeated and for saving him in his old age. As a child, further, she had repeated that tale to her companion, Mortimer – vicariously engendering in him a similar saving passion that leads him not only to the role he plays as captain of the band of borderers, in the absence of established authority to secure their lands from invading enemies, but also to a problematically trusting susceptibility to passionate narrative.

I propose this as an “untoward” reading, yet one that nonetheless has an insistent plausibility in Wordsworth's language sufficient to generate the uncertainty that I see as the essential hallmark of powerful tragedy. The slander of Rivers's perfidious tales about Herbert rings paradoxically true, giving tragic force to the fatal plot those tales generate in Mortimer against Matilda's pitifully blind father. Readings of *The Borderers* that focus primarily on how Rivers conspires to betray Mortimer into a murder (repeating the very crime Rivers subsequently claims that he himself as a youthful sailor was betrayed into by his shipmates) overlook how tales everywhere in the play work to bind their hearers into similar structures of repetition, generating in them passions that lead them to reenact not only the tales they are told but also to take on characters

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mirroring those of the tellers. This chapter concludes by exploring the significance of resonances in Wordsworth's Herbert with one of Shakespeare's problematic father-figures, Prospero. The latter's insistent tales of enforced exile from Milan, in the process, as it were, saving his daughter Miranda and vehemently rejecting the islander Caliban as a "malignant thing," are bound up with his own passionately repressive forgetfulness, not only about the abdication of ducal responsibility implicit in his pursuit of "secret studies" in Milan but also, remarkably, about his own role in engendering that "thing of darkness" he finally comes to "acknowledge mine." The paternal uncertainties created in Shakespeare's drama model similar effects in *The Borderers*.

Chapter 2, "Cradling French Macbeth: Managing the art of second-hand Shakespeare," focuses on Wordsworth's several-week sojourn in Paris in autumn 1792, after leaving his lover Annette eight months pregnant in Orleans. His arrival in the seething capital of the Revolution coincided with the final performance on November 1 at the Théâtre de la République (the chief venue for Girondin theatricality, outside the National Convention) of a revival run of playwright Jean-François Ducis's acclaimed 1790 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with the newly celebrated – and somewhat histrionic – François-Joseph Talma in the title role. My speculation is that Wordsworth either attended that performance or obtained a printed copy of the play, or possibly both. Drawing on a complex network of intertextual resonances in *The Borderers* as well as on Wordsworth's account in the 1805 *Prelude* Book x of his insomniac Parisian night spent reading "tragic fictions" and hearing the guilty cry "Sleep no more!" through the city, this chapter rereads moments in *The Borderers* against those in Ducis's own appropriation, for his version of *Macbeth*, of passages in Racine's *Andromaque* and *Athalie* narrating the fates of children at risk. (Ducis's most bizarre swerve from Shakespeare's tragedy stages infanticide by a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth – renamed Frédegonde after the bloody Merovingian queen – mistakenly stabbing her own cradled child instead of Malcolm, the intended infant victim of her dream.) Behind both Ducis's revolutionary and Racine's neoclassical fictions in Wordsworth's Parisian retrospective lies Virgil's account, in the second book of the *Aeneid*, of the heroic Trojan refugee on his mission to found Rome, abandoning in effigy the grieving shade of his wife Creusa.

These intertextual resonances suggest that Wordsworth's abandoned, pregnant Annette was much on his mind during those autumn days in Paris, especially as what seemed more and more inevitable loomed: the execution of the imprisoned Louis XVI, with the likelihood of ensuing

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hostilities between England and France making reunion with her ever less likely. Taken together, Wordsworth's unstaged tragedy and his unpublished autobiography perform a retrospective comeuppance to the long eighteenth century's preoccupation with founding myths of heroic individuality and nation-building. Reading Wordsworth's play in this richly intertextual context aligns it with the function Michael Simpson has recently argued for drama in early nineteenth-century England, akin to Shakespeare's instrumentality "for focusing the existence of a national public." The imperative that Simpson contends motivated that role for English drama was "the figure of France" – "An imperial competition with France is a precondition of national identity rather than the other way around."²

Chapter 3, "In some sort seeing with my proper eyes': Wordsworth and the spectacles of Paris," explores the likelihood that, in addition to Ducis's *Macbeth*, Wordsworth also attended – during the last days of his November/December stay in Paris – a performance at La République of Ducis's adaptation of *Othello*, again starring Talma, as well as the performance of either or both of two linked French adaptations of Schiller's *Die Räuber* staged at the Théâtre de Marais: *Robert, Chef de Brigands* and *Robert républicain, ou Le Tribunal redoutable*. Aspects of Ducis's *Othello*, which drew extensive coverage in both Girondin and Jacobin reviews – particularly the prominence of Brabantio's opposition to his daughter's liaison with the Moorish warrior – have strong affinities with the tense triangulation in *The Borderers* among Herbert, Matilda, and Mortimer. The ghostly presence in Ducis's *Othello* of Desdemona remembering her dying mother's prophecy of her wretched death ("*tu mourras malheureuse*") has affinities with the role of Wordsworth's female beggar in *The Borderers*. The two staged Parisian adaptations of Schiller's *Die Räuber*, as well as another, *Les Voleurs*, published in 1785 by Nicolas de Bonneville, a prominent Girondin whom Wordsworth may well have known personally and certainly knew of in 1792, also offer suggestive models for Mortimer's deranged attempt in Act v to put Matilda out of the misery of loving her father's assassin. Chapters 2 and 3 together provide theatrical contexts in which to uncover some of the minute particulars of the experience Wordsworth veiled in his often-cited note when he finally published his revised version of *The Borderers* in 1842: "During my long residence in France, while the Revolution was rapidly advancing to its extreme of wickedness, I had frequent opportunities of being an eye-witness of this process, and it was while that knowledge was fresh upon my memory, that the tragedy of 'The Borderers' was composed."³

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Chapter Four, the final one on *The Borderers*, “Drinking up whole rivers’: facing Wordsworth’s watery discourse,” argues that the sway Rivers the “dramatic character” has held over so many readers is not unlike what he holds for much of the play over Mortimer. This chapter resists that sway, emphasizing – instead of that character’s psychology and philosophy – the significance of two apparently opposed and interacting tropes that pervade the language and action of *The Borderers*: those of perilous flux associated with water and those of fixity, especially the staring eye, associated with the face. The first section analyzes the watery language that makes Rivers’s name rhetorically dramatic in ways not previously noticed that inform the play’s central drama: the struggle between the forceful clarity of purposefulness and the undifferentiated confusion of pathos; between the orderly construction of reality and its dissipation in chaos and despair. Narratives of literal drownings and figurative expressions of whelming and sinking oppose manly standing and force. My argument associates such watery discourse with comparable imagery that so strikingly pervades Wordsworth’s early poems – from the unpublished *Vale of Esthwaite* through *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* – which Duncan Wu has recently contended manifest feelings of unresolved grief, betrayal, and guilt following the boyhood trauma of his parents’ early deaths. The second section of the chapter probes the recurrence in *The Borderers* of figures of seeing (and, especially, of *beholding*) the face, culminating in an enigmatic moment in the final act, when action and dialogue are suspended in a prolonged tableau, as specified by the talismanic stage direction: “MORTIMER and RIVERS *mutually fasten their eyes on each other for some time.*”

Part II of the book comprises two chapters on versions of a tragedy Coleridge first composed in conjunction with Wordsworth’s *The Borderers*, followed by a third and concluding chapter on Percy Shelley’s *The Cenci*. Chapter 5, “*Osorio*’s dark employments: tricking out Coleridgean tragedy,” argues for that 1797 play – refused by Richard Sheridan’s Drury Lane – a powerful spectral mode in which the language of haunting spirits conjures a dramaturgy to which even the barest Shakespearean stage could hardly have done justice. Set in sixteenth-century Granada during the reign of Phillip II, and obviously indebted to Schiller’s *Die Räuber* and its depiction of Spanish persecution of the Moors, *Osorio* draws also on the vogue in the mid-1790s for Gothic fiction and drama, particularly in M. G. Lewis’s *The Monk* and *The Castle Spectre*. Physical disguises and spoken dissemblings generate a drama rich with radical uncertainties whose darker suggestiveness effectively undermines interpretations that

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would find only unadulterated virtue in one brother (Albert) and correspondingly opposing viciousness in the other (Osorio). The manifestly gothic trappings of the third act's sorcery scene – a substantially altered version of which in Coleridge's *Remorse* fifteen years later produced such popular effect for audiences at Drury Lane – are part of a deftly woven fabric of ghostly, animistic trickery, the likes of which no other play of the Romantic period attempts. At the heart of *Osorio* is a daring sense that the staging of bodies and words produces resonant moments of willful disguise and deception, naïve self-deception, and possession – moments involving the narration of subtly interlaced memories and dreams, where self-deceiving idealisms are confounded with darker vengefulness.

In the second chapter on Coleridge, my chief project at the outset is to read – that is, imaginatively to hear – *Remorse*, his substantial revision of *Osorio* performed at Drury Lane, through the resonant dynamics of voice. “Listening to *Remorse*,” then, means attending to its remarkable poetic dramaturgy involving specific moments of listening and hearing, particularly overhearing (the latter including but not limited to stealthy eavesdropping), and their disturbing, untoward consequences: starts, trances, mutterings, and uncanny recognitions linked to dreams, fancies, wishes, reveries, promptings, forebodings, and – especially – hauntings. Such staged effects – akin to what might happen in the mind of a reader or theatergoer – amount to this tragedy's distinctive refrain. Coleridge pursues these moments to such a degree that they constitute a significant tropology of listening. If to a considerable extent the dramatic effects produced stem from the energies and occupations of his personality, and if they reflect also major aspects of his literary, philosophical, and political investigations in such contemporary publications as *The Friend* and public lectures on drama and Shakespeare, their operation in *Remorse* nonetheless produces a notably original literary and dramatic composition, one peculiarly – for the right audience drawn from the solitary confines of the closet – stageworthy.

Buried in this claim is the argument that *Remorse* achieves its intensity and power as drama because it depends on its reflexive involvement with the dynamics of Coleridge's own brilliantly articulated dreams and distresses. Crucial here are his troubled relations at Grasmere with Sara Hutchinson and Wordsworth, intensified after his return from Malta, his laudanum dependency uncured, and culminating – in the wake of Sara's exhausting collaboration in producing *The Friend* – with her abrupt departure to Wales in March 1810, followed three months later by the turbulent rupture of his relationship to Wordsworth when Coleridge

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moved to London. Drawing extensively on Coleridge's notebooks (notably in passages where his distraught idealizings of 'Asra' resonate with his momentous fascination with the saintly tribulations depicted in *The Life of St. Teresa*) and on letters exchanged among members of the Wordsworth circle, I argue that *Remorse's* fraught triangular dynamics among Alvar, Teresa, and Ordonio – the names in *Osorio* deftly altered both to conceal and to announce their personal bearings – became the business of assassination painting when Coleridge dispatched annotated copies to Grasmere.

Despite Percy Shelley's assurance from Italy to his nervous London publisher that his new play *The Cenci* had "no reference, direct or indirect, to politics, or religion, or personal satire," Chapter 7, "Reading Shelley's delicacy," argues that the tragedy he hoped Covent Garden or Drury Lane would stage is thoroughly imbued with precisely such "references." What Shelley called the "peculiar delicacy" with which he treated the "chief circumstance" of "incest" in the play involves dramatizing the relation of Count Cenci and his daughter Beatrice in language whose *finesse* invites seeing, in the mirror of Renaissance Rome, reflections of Shelley's own embittered and satiric sense of Regency England's political, religious, and literary culture. Symptomatic of that delicacy at the outset are covert but unmistakable resonances with Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," both in Count Cenci's opening repudiation when Cardinal Camillo conveys the price for the Pope's absolution for his crimes and later in the wildness of Beatrice's responses to her father's incestuous violence. At the heart of this reading is the uncertainty of what happens to Beatrice offstage. Crucial to Shelley's drama is Beatrice's tragic sense of herself as a divine "instrument" carrying out God's will in perpetrating her father's death, a mission for her devoid of moral duplicity. Bound up with that reading is the suggestion of Count Cenci's impotence, along with the implication that his most horrifically diabolic violation consists not of carnal rape but of terrorizing Beatrice into being the instrument of his suicidal agenda. The chapter also argues for Beatrice's need and will to resist the gentler but no less confining sway of "what remains behind" once Cenci is done in: that of the bondage of nature associated from the start with the figure of Lucretia, her morally ambiguous, "more than mother" stepmother.

A following section probes the pervasive dramatic effects of language representing "eyes" and "looks," generating powerful uncertainties that culminate in Beatrice's fixing her eyes on Marzio in a performance of power that prepares the way for his last words defying the rack's terrifying

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crudity: “a keener pain has wrung a higher truth / From my last breath. She is most innocent!” – a remarkably credible exoneration.⁴ The last part of the chapter, offered as a coda, focuses on passages from a number of verse and prose works Shelley composed more or less immediately before or after drafting *The Cenci*, and whose language particularly resonates with that of his tragedy: the lyric drama *Prometheus Unbound*, the stanzas he composed “On the Medusa of Leonardo in the Florentine Gallery,” some notes he made on sculptures also in the Uffizi, and “The Mask of Anarchy.” This final phase, then, of what has been aptly called Shelley’s “annus mirabilis,” resounds with tragedy.

In each of the plays close reading offers new insights and theories about what could be called the *dramatic* agenda consciously – or in some instances doubtless unconsciously – undertaken by the playwright. Many of those insights involve the workings of the passions in ways that alter and disrupt one person’s relation to another: a child to a parent, a servant to a superior, a citizen to a nation, a cardinal to a pope, a Beatrice to a God. Often in these plays such disruptions take place across generations and across genders; in each they also challenge or even upset structures of established power, often also with unforeseen consequences. Read this way, these dramas ideally call for performance venues, skilled actors’ bodily diligence and creative fidelity to script, and audience attentiveness that will foster not only appreciation of crucial nuances but – bound up with them – a sense of passion’s crucial role in the essential uncertainties of tragedy: an impossible menu but nonetheless one worth attempting. *Remorse*’s anomalous “success” in cavernous Drury Lane, with a cast beset by deficiencies and an audience chiefly primed for extravagant spectacles, hardly filled the bill. And yet – like Joanna Baillie’s – the tragedies composed by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, each in their idiosyncratic ways, came as close as perhaps could be hoped to filling it.

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PART I

Wordsworth