

Background

“Half dust, half deity, unfit alike to sink or soar” (1.2.41-2). This line spoken by the titular character in Byron’s play *Manfred* seems to encapsulate the ennui that permeates the drama and likely reflects the playwright’s own state of mind as he wrote his famous closet drama. Inspired by a tour through the Alps, Byron wrote *Manfred* in 1816—17 during a decidedly low point in his life, shortly after the dissolution of his marriage to Anne Millbanke and his subsequent exile from British society.¹ The author fled England amidst rumors of insanity and accusations of sexual deviancy. Some critics consider the play to be autobiographical. These critics include the authors Hedblad and Whitaker, who in their book *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism* state the following: “...critics consider it [*Manfred*] to be autobiographical, or even confessional” (454). This view is supported by The Poetry Foundation who state in their introduction to *Manfred* that: “Manfred, the eponymous protagonist, is essentially Byron, the drama’s conflict a fusion of the personal and the cosmic, its goal relief” (www.The Poetry Foundation). Lynch, and Stillenger, also state that Manfred is confessional in nature and was meant to explore Byron’s own incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh (636) and Melany writes that: [in *Manfred*] Byron’s poetry has an autobiographical and textual significance... (1).” Even Byron’s friend and publisher John Murray felt that the work was too autobiographical and hesitated to publish it out of fear of further ruining his friend’s reputation (Marchand 269). Because of the fact that Byron’s own plight is analogous to that of Manfred’s in many ways, it could be argued that the drama provided a means for Byron to excise his demons and attempt to stabilize his own deteriorating mental health.

Manfred has often been called “theater of the mind,” and by utilizing the Psychoanalytic discipline of psychodrama, the play *Manfred* can be viewed as a form of cathartic exercise wherein the author deals with his own psychological issues.² These issues revolve around his then current life and social situation, but on a deeper level are also related to his childhood relationship with his mother and the sexual abuse he experienced at the hands of his governess May Gray (Marchand 20). The play also deals with the psychological consequences of his own incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh.

¹ The majority of the drama *Manfred* was written while Byron toured the Bernese Alps in September 1816, however, the final act was rewritten in the first months of 1817. See *Manfred*, By Lord Byron – Introduction in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 8th ed., p. 635..

² See *Byron’s Poetry*. p.124..

Psychodrama

Psychodynamic literary criticism is nothing new; it is a widely acknowledged field, and is taught in graduate programs alongside formalism, feminism and post-structuralism. Psychodrama is a form of psychodynamic therapy which utilizes drama as its healing modality.

Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, was an avid reader and he applied his psychological theories to many works of literature. He wrote several important essays where he explored the psychological processes of writers and the characters that inhabited their works of fiction. He also utilized works of literature to elucidate new concepts in psychoanalysis.³ His 1907 essay entitled *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva* is an excellent example of this, as is his treatment of the Oedipus myth within Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which is found within his classic book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In fact, Freud even provided a detailed analysis of Byron's *Manfred* in his 1911 treatise entitled, *Psychoanalytic Notes Upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*. In it he stated:

...in connection with a soul-murder in, for example, Lord Byron's *Manfred*.⁴ (20.) In the play which is thus referred to there is scarcely anything comparable to the bartering of Faust's soul, and I have searched it in vain for the expression 'soul-murder'. But the essence and the secret of the whole work lies in - an incestuous relation between a brother and a sister (67).

Here Freud focuses on the incestuous aspect of the drama, but overlooks the cathartic potential that the drama holds for the author. However, this can be understood in light of the fact that Freud's primary focus was on his patient and not on Byron. His comments on Byron's *Don Juan* in his essay entitled *On Creativity and the Unconscious* are perhaps more germane to a discussion of psychodrama; and even though they were written about *Don Juan*, they can also be applied to *Manfred*. He said:

Some actual experiences which made a strong impression on the writer has stirred up a memory of an earlier experience, generally belonging to childhood, which then arouses a wish that then finds a fulfillment in the work in question, and in which elements of the recent event and old memory should be discernable (qtd. in Tate 135).

Here Freud discusses the psychodynamic idea that the artist's subconscious mind can be

³ For more information on Freud's reading habits see, Prawer's *A Cultural Citizen of the World*.

apprehended through his or her artistic endeavors, and highlights the probability that Byron's works were influenced by his past experiences and served as potential sources of cathartic release for the author. He understands that even though Byron's writings were fictitious, there were likely strong correlations between the author and his fictional characters.

Freud, Jung and Lacan are all well-known within the field of literary criticism, but the same cannot be said of Moreno and his theory of psychodrama.⁴ This seems unfortunate because his approach would seem to naturally lend itself to the analysis of dramas. That being said, it should be noted that literature and psychodrama are different in many regards and while psychodrama is designed to resolve mental health issues, literature goes beyond the individual to address issues of societal, spiritual, political, religious and existential implications. Any attempt to provide an analysis of a complicated work like *Manfred* based on psychodramatic theory is necessarily reductive. And where it is tempting to view some Byronic heroes—particularly Manfred—as mere psychological extensions of the author himself, it is unwise to do so due to Byron's penchant for playfulness and wit and his tendency to write with a high degree of irony. It should also be noted that there is a difference between a work that is autobiographical in nature and an autobiography. Critics are wise to avoid formulating direct correspondences between Byron and Byronic heroes. This paper will attempt to pinpoint areas where the author and his protagonist share similar circumstances and motivations while trying to avoid the pitfall of direct identification.

It is not unheard of for the term “psychodrama” to be bandied about with some frequency in regard to Byron's works, however most of the criticisms which mention the term do not focus on the actual nuts and bolts of Moreno's theory. They instead utilize the term to indicate some kind of psychoanalytical approach where Freud's (not Moreno's) theory is applied to a passage or work that seems particularly autobiographical and cathartic. One notable exception to this trend is Candace Tate's excellent article entitled, “Byron's Don Juan: Myth as Psychodrama”. In this article she states:

Throughout the poem, we can see elements of Byron's childhood, his marriage and divorce, and the trauma of his relationship with Augusta Leigh interwoven into Juan's adventures. If we expand upon Freud, using Moreno's principles of psychodrama,

⁴ Freud's disciple/rival Carl Jung was influential within the field of psychodynamic literary criticism. His concepts of archetype and the collective unconscious are especially useful. French philosopher Jacques Lacan was perhaps the most influential of the psychodynamic literary theorist, especially in terms of his post-structuralist ideas about the concepts of the self and the importance of linguistic development.

however, according to which the actor (who is also the author) in this genre is the protagonist, and all the other characters represent “auxiliary egos,” actors who “play the roles of absent people involved in his problems or fears (135)...”

By this statement Tate indicates that she is aware of Moreno’s theory and how it applies to a close reading of Byron. She uses—and correctly applies—the term, “auxiliary ego” and explains how author/actor/protagonist interacts with these characters in order to work through the psychological issues which confront the author. The concept of the auxiliary ego is unique to Moreno’s theory of psychodrama, and Tate’s proper usage of the term indicates that she has a serious understanding of the theory and how it might be applied to Byronic studies. However it is disappointing that she mentions a scant few of Moreno’s other concepts within her article. Conversely, when Timothy Morton mentions psychodrama in his article, “Byron’s Manfred and Ecocriticism” he does not mention any of the actual facets of Moreno’s theory. He says: “Manfred appears to be the ultimate Romantic psychodrama. ‘Scene: a Gothic galley. Time: midnight’...Manfred the protagonist, spends most of his time rhapsodizing on his angst-ridden mind” (155). Here his use of the term “psychodrama” is fleeting and generic—a throw-away term used before he makes his actual point. It should be noted that Gothic galleys and angst-ridden protagonists are not necessarily features of actual psychodrama. Whereas Morton is undoubtedly familiar with Moreno’s theory, he gives the reader no indication of whether he is talking about the actual practice of psychodrama or some other form of drama which features heavy psychological themes and seems to provide emotional relief for the author.

The fact that Moreno’s theory of psychodrama is referenced so haphazardly within the field of literary analysis seems to indicate that the principles of the theory could bear some explanation. Psychodrama is a form of Freudian psychotherapeutic intervention which utilizes drama as a method to help clients achieve emotional catharsis through the reenactment of emotionally significant events, dreams, and relationships. This therapeutic approach is by necessity rich in symbolic meaning and relies on a Freudian theoretical framework in order to interpret the psychological significance of the images and actions which appear within clients’ psychodramas. Psychodrama is a forerunner of group therapy and was developed by Moreno in the early part of the 20th century. Moreno started developing his new therapeutic technique with a group of prostitutes while he was still a university student in Vienna in 1917. The outcome of this group work could be considered the very first psychological support group.

Moreno was influenced by psychologists like Reich and Freud who supplied the basic theoretical construct for his nascent form of therapy. His initial work combined dramatic technique and psychological counseling. It was conducted with American children, but he eventually graduated to working with large groups of adults. He was known for holding his therapy sessions in places like Impromptu Group Theatre at Carnegie Hall. As a result, his work became widely known and respected among American psychologists.⁵

The participants in psychodrama sessions act out their internal conflicts under the watchful eye of the director/therapist. Some of the specific techniques utilized within these sessions include, mirroring and role reversals and the utilization of auxiliary egos. During a typical session, an individual client will act out his or her psychological issues by interacting with the other participants who take on the roles of significant people in the main actor's life. These other participants are called auxiliary egos. This paper will address these three features of Psychodrama (mirroring, role reversals and auxiliary egos) as they relate to the closet drama *Manfred*. This paper will attempt to shed light into the actual therapeutic features of Moreno's theory of psychodrama and elucidate new ways which these features can be utilized while analyzing dramas. It is apparent that the term psychodrama is sometimes used within literary circles with little regard for its actual psychological theory and therapeutic practice. It is the hope of the author to correctly apply the terminology and techniques of Moreno's theory and provide a nuanced analysis of Byron's play *Manfred* while putting forward the idea that by faithfully applying these same techniques and theories, Moreno's psychodrama could be a useful critical idiom for the analysis of dramas. This represents a different approach from what has been attempted by other authors who, although they undoubtedly understand the concepts of psychodrama, have done little to educate the reader about how these concepts apply to the close reading of literary works.

Mirroring

Mirroring entails having the client act out a scenario as the protagonist. When the scene has been completed, the client comes off the stage and watches as another actor portrays the client/ protagonist. The mirror acts out what the protagonist has just expressed. In other words, the mirror speaks for the protagonist. When the second actor is finished, the client is allowed to discuss his or her feelings about what he/she observed.

⁵ See Moreno's *Psychodrama*.

There are many analogues between Manfred and the plight that Byron found himself in during the year 1816. Byron's choice to leave British society closely mirrors Manfred's self-imposed exile. It is also clear that the author's unspeakable crime was the same as Manfred's—namely engaging in an incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. It is only a small leap of credulity to assume that the feelings of guilt and the longing for oblivion ascribed to Manfred the character, were also experienced by Byron, the author. Byron's own psyche lurks just under the surface of the drama's protagonist and readers can easily ascertain Byron's own psychological process as he works through the psychological trauma in his life. Manfred—the protagonist, is Byron's mirror and Byron uses the character to act out his own psychological turmoil. Not only can the reader see traces of Byron's then current life situation in Manfred, but vestiges of childhood trauma are also exposed. This includes Byron's life-long feelings of psychological isolation which stemmed from his belief that he was different from (and better than) the rest of society and his self-imposed exile from England and English society. Byron's perception of his own superiority and isolation is mirrored by the character Manfred, who expresses his discontent in the following manner:

My pang shall find a voice. From my youth upwards
My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
The aim of their existence was not mine;
My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers
Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,
I had no sympathy with breathing flesh,
Nor midst the creatures of clay that girded me
Was there but one who—but of her anon.
I said, with men, and with the thoughts of men,
I held but slight communion... (2.2.55-66)

From this quote it is clear that Manfred knew from an early age that he was different—and in his own opinion—better than the rest of humanity. The goals and ambitions of mankind are

different from his, and his power marks him as unique and makes him want to be separate. Even the thought processes of other people are alien and, in his mind, inferior to his own. He can't empathize with their experience and holds the rest of mankind in low regard. As a result of these differences, Manfred experiences psychological isolation. He then makes his isolation complete by removing himself from society and living in a remote castle. This description of Manfred could also be applied to Byron. As Rawson points out in his *New York Times* review of Eisler's book *Byron*:

...Byron was also a coolly arrogant English lord, whose espousal of popular causes expressed a lofty patrician radicalism and who despised the foreigners whose struggle for independence he led (without seeing much fighting) from above. Being a lord was more important than being a writer...He regarded other Romantic poets as lowborn hacks, 'would-be wits and can't-be gentlemen,' as well as political conservatives and turncoats (5/9/99).

Byron also held himself aloof from the concerns of the common man. He saw himself as being superior both in terms of lineage, and intellect, to nearly everyone he met. He held his peers in contempt and viewed the people whom he tried to help with a sort of benevolent condescension. As Byron was writing *Manfred*, he was well aware that he was entering into his own self-imposed exile. As he was traveling in the Alps in 1816, he was, in a very real sense, running away from England and the only home that he had ever known. The high Alps were seen as an ideal setting for his drama *Manfred*. The loneliness of the high peaks took on an almost sublime quality and found resonance with Byron's feelings of isolation and exile.

Role Reversal

Role reversal is a therapeutic technique wherein the client is asked to portray another person while a second actor pretends as if he or she is the client. When a role reversal is acted out in a psychodrama session the protagonist changes positions with the significant other. The significant other can be a family member, a romantic partner a friend or coworker. The significant other can be played by the actual significant other or can be enacted by another member of the cast/therapy group. It is the protagonist's responsibility to act out the significant other's behavior as closely as possible. For instance, the protagonist is encouraged to use the same figures of speech, attitude, physical posture, etc. as the significant other in order to relay as much information as possible to the audience. The role-reversed dyad is then

directed to act out a scene from the client's life. This activity is useful because it allows the client to see how he or she appears to other people. It also allows the client to develop empathy for other people in his or her life by imagining how his or her behaviors affect those around him or her. This technique is one of the mainstays of Psychodrama because it allows the protagonist to graphically act out his or her interpersonal conflicts on stage. In this way the protagonist has the opportunity to step out of his or her own role and into the role of the other person involved in the conflict. This technique helps the protagonist develop empathy for the other person while also allowing the other members of the cast, the director and the audience to develop an understanding about the specific role that each person plays in the conflict. In order for a client to be proficient at the task of role reversal, he or she must have developed enough empathy to see another's point of view.

Within the psychodrama of *Manfred*, readers experience a role-reversal when Byron voices the character of the Abbot of Saint Maurice. In the dialogue between the character Manfred and the abbot, we see what it would be like if Byron were being confronted by a devoutly religious man. According to Marchand, Byron was cynical toward theological ideas and his relationship with his governess May Gray left him with a deep distrust of all things Calvinistic (20).⁶ Marchand describes Byron's religious views in the following manner:

“...deeply ingrained in his unconscious mind, a gloomy Calvinism made him feel that the majority of men and he in particular had the mark of Cain and were slated for damnation. After exhausting his powers of reason, wit, and ridicule in trying to refute the arguments of religion, he would often say with violence: ‘The worst part of it is, I do believe’” (194).

Those of his acquaintances who tried to get Byron to repent or convert to a more orthodox approach to Protestantism were often met with ridicule. However, Byron seemed to have a somewhat more tolerant attitude toward Catholicism and readers can also find a tolerant and measured depiction of Islam in his poem *The Gaiour*.⁷

Manfred's interaction with the abbot is different from what one might expect from the cynical author. This is because Byron portrays the Abbot of Saint Maurice with warmth and

⁶ “It seems the worst blows he suffered at the hands of May Gray were psychological rather than physical. The disillusioning experience of seeing her devote her caresses to others after their intimacy may well have roused a maddened jealousy that caused the boy to tell... This experience with an apparently pious girl who had taught him to read the Bible may have been an additional shock and in part the foundation of his lifelong hatred of cant and hypocrisy in religious people.” P.20 Marchand. *Byron: A Portrait*.

⁷ For a more detailed understanding of Byron's views on Islam see Mole's “Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror.” *The Byron Journal*. Vol.37, no.2.

dignity. The abbot is a good man who is genuinely interested in helping Manfred. He offers forgiveness, hope and connection to Manfred and displays strength and bravery in the face of Manfred's demons. One of the final dialogues of the play comes from the Abbot who sadly reflects about the wasted potential of Manfred, who despite his superior talents and intellect, has failed to provide anything useful to society, but has instead become isolated and dangerous. He says:

This should have been a noble creature: he
 Hath all the energy which would have
 made a goodly frame of glorious elements,
 Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,
 It is an awful chaos—Light and Darkness—
 And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts
 Mixed, and contending without end or order,—
 All dormant and destructive. He will perish—(3.3.160-7)

From a psychodynamic point of view Manfred/Byron was a narcissist. One of the primary diagnostic features of narcissism is a sense of grandiosity (DSM-5). These expressions of superiority and specialness may be legitimately heartfelt, but often serve as overcompensation for a sense of inferiority. Both Byron and Manfred display this outer facade of grandiosity and superiority. This can be seen in Manfred's conversation with the witch where he states that he has little in common with the rest of humanity and perceives himself better than the other people who surround him (2.2 55-66). These statements are grandiose on the surface, but are probably nothing more than a shell to cover his deeply-seated feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. For Byron, his sense of grandeur likely developed as an over-compensation for his feelings of inferiority due to his physical deformity, coupled with his upbringing which featured a combination of neglect, abuse and materialistic overindulgence. Likewise, the protagonist Manfred seems on the surface to be a superior being, but underneath all of the spirit-summoning magical abilities and world-weary intellect there lies a fragile self who struggles for adequacy by performing arcane feats and disdaining the common man.

Readers can also detect traces of narcissism in Byron's rendering of the character Astarte. Manfred describes her in this manner:

She was like me in lineaments—her eyes
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty;
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind
To comprehend the universe: nor these
Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,
Pity, and smiles, and tears—which I had not;
And tenderness—but that I had for her;
Humility—and that I never had.
Her faults were mine—her virtues were her own—
I loved her, and destroy'd her!

The fact that Manfred considers her to be the ideal woman is in no small part because she is a female version of himself. He loves her because he is obsessed with himself. She looks the same as Manfred, she speaks in the same manner, has the same interests and the same goals. In essence, she possesses all the desirable attributes that Manfred possesses; with the addition of some characteristics that Manfred doesn't possess—namely empathy and humility. The primary difference between Astarte and Manfred is that Manfred is male and Astarte is female. And whereas Manfred's attributes may seem harsh or somehow imperfect when displayed by a man they become softened and perfected when expressed by a woman. D.L. MacDonald states it this way:

The similarities and even the dissimilarities in this catalogue suggest that Manfred's love for Astarte was an expression of what Peter L. Thorslev would call his "narcissistic sensibility" (50). Astarte was Manfred's ideal, and Freud has characterized idealizing love as essentially narcissistic: "The object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own," in this case Astarte's feminine "gentler powers"; "We love it on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism (112-13).

It is in his role as the abbot that Byron can address Manfred's (as well as his own) narcissism. The abbot is able to see through Manfred's grandiosity to the fragile self-esteem

that is devastated by the loss of love and the need to be forgiven for a sexually shameful act. It is this role-reversal which shows Byron how he must appear to other—especially devout—people. He portrays himself as a man with many talents and abilities who has ultimately amounted to nothing. In this drama, the priest is not impressed with Manfred's intellect. He is not frightened by Manfred's power, nor is he dismayed by Manfred's shame. The abbot simply offers Manfred the chance for redemption, forgiveness and community.

The true power of the role-reversal is that by putting words into the mouth of the abbot, Byron had the opportunity to develop empathy for the priest and religious people in general. Byron was able to see how other people must have viewed him and he was also able to develop some sympathy for the religious point of view by depicting an honest and caring abbot.

The auxiliary ego

Moreno postulated that each individual is a social being, interdependent on the people around him or her. He saw relationships as an extension of the individual and part of a sustaining social network. He also noted that there was an increased threat to the survival of individuals who experienced an extreme poverty of social relationships. Moreno's first major work is entitled, *Who Shall Survive?* The book deals with the issue of isolation, especially in the case of young children who depend on their parents to interpret the world for them.

The role of the auxiliary ego is typically played by a person who represents another absent person; however the auxiliary can also be played by inanimate objects, delusions, hallucinations, symbols, ideas, animals or dreams (Moreno 17). It is the purpose of the auxiliary ego to make the protagonist's psychodramatic experience more real and tangible. It is also the function of the auxiliary ego to faithfully fulfill the role of an absent person as closely as possible according to the perceptions of the protagonist. Unlike an actor who engages in the mirroring role, the auxiliary ego does not represent the protagonist, but instead represents other significant people in his or her life. The mirror speaks *for* the protagonist, but the auxiliary egos perform a different function. They speak *to* the protagonist. They must help the protagonist investigate his or her perception of the relationship between himself/herself and the absent person. This is done through role-play. The auxiliary ego must also interpret how the absent person is feeling in relation to the protagonist. Sometimes this requires that the auxiliary ego must exaggerate the behaviors and emotions of the person whom he or she is

representing. This is especially true if such exaggerations would clarify psychological issues between the protagonist and the auxiliary ego. The auxiliary ego is also tasked with helping the protagonist develop greater psychological balance. When this is not possible, the auxiliary ego must help the protagonist create psychological separation from himself/herself. Finally it is the job of the auxiliary ego to help the protagonist return to the social world, all the while accepting direction from both the director and the protagonist (creative psychotherapy).

In Byron's psychodrama he is both the actor and the author. Tate explains it this way:

If we expand on Freud using Moreno's principals of psychodrama, however, according to which the actor (who is also the author) in this genre is the protagonist, and all the other characters in the [drama] represent "auxiliary egos," actors "play the roles of absent people involved in his problems or fears," (135).⁸

The characters that inhabit his drama are the auxiliary egos. This includes the priest, the chamois hunter, the witch, the spirits and the star. Many of these characters likely represent significant individuals and amalgamations of people in Byron's life. They do not represent Byron or speak for Byron as a mirror image would; instead they speak for the other people involved in Byron's life. Undoubtedly, the most important auxiliary ego in the play is the phantom of Astarte. As stated above, from the time *Manfred* was first published, critics were quick to identify the character Astarte as an autobiographical allusion to Byron's sister, Augusta. Marchand says this: "Murray had hesitated to publish *Manfred*, fearing the public reaction to the poem's unorthodox and daring speculations and its too obvious identification of Astarte with Byron's sister" (269).

From a Freudian point of view the entire interaction between Manfred and Astarte can be explained by the fact that Byron had a difficult early childhood and developed neurotic fixations during many of the stages of his psychosexual development.⁹ Most significantly, Byron did not successfully complete the Phallic Stage of Freud's psychosexual development as evidenced by his obvious Oedipal fixation which plays out in many ways in *Manfred*, but especially in his relationship to his dead lover Astarte.

One of the overarching features of the Oedipal complex is the son's desire to sexually merge with his own mother. This childish desire is actually nothing more than a metaphoric desire to return to the womb, which in turn, is nothing more than a psychological desire to

⁸ See also Ira A. Greenberg, "Psychodrama and Audience Change."

⁹ For a complete description of Freud's stages of psychosexual development and the Oedipal Complex, see Freud's *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*. Penguin Books, 1991.

return to the most simple and natural state possible—in other words, Manfred’s desire for oblivion. This desire is explicitly stated by Manfred in Act I when he communicates with the spirits that he magically summoned:

We can but give thee what we possess:
Ask of us subjects, sovereignty, the power
O'er earth, the whole, or portion, or a sign
Which shall control the elements, whereof
We are the dominators,—each and all,
These shall be thine.
MANFRED. Oblivion, self-oblivion—
Can ye not wring from out the hidden realms
Ye offer so profusely what I ask? (1.1.139-47)

This Oedipal quest to forget and experience the sweet relief of oblivion is central to Byron’s plot. It is the force which drives the character Manfred to speak to spirits and ultimately to attain his own death.

Manfred’s interaction with the spirit of Astarte shows the reader the depth of feeling that Manfred/Byron has toward her and her silence also shows the readers Byron’s perception of the ambivalence that Astarte/Augusta Leigh felt toward Manfred/Byron. Astarte’s initial silence toward Manfred can be explained by the fact that when Byron was writing his drama, his estranged former wife had insisted that Augusta cut off all correspondence with the author. The former Lady Byron wrote to her friend, “I am now leading her [Augusta] to promise that she will never renew a confidential intercourse [with Byron] by letter—or any personal intercourse” (Marchand 247). Augusta, complied with Lady Byron’s wishes and did not contact her brother for two years. This left Byron in a state of agitation not knowing whether or not Augusta could forgive him for the turmoil that he had caused in her life (Marchand). We can see this interaction in the second act of the drama where Manfred says: “Oh God! That I should dread/ To look upon the same—Astarte!—No,/ I cannot speak to her—but I bid her speak—/Forgive me or condemn me.” Astarte initially replies with silence (2.2.103-5). This state of ambiguity was the same response that Byron, the author, received when he attempted to communicate with his half-sister Augusta Leigh following his departure from England. In a later passage Manfred begs for clarification from Astarte. He says:

Astarte! My beloved! Speak to me:

I have so much endured—so much to endure—
Look on me! the grave hath not changed thee more
Than I am changed for thee: we were not made
To torture thus each other—Though it were
The deadliest sin to love as we have loved.
Say thou loath'st me not— (2.4.118-24).

Astarte responds to this passionate outpouring by assuring Manfred that he will die the following day.¹⁰ The forgiveness that he seeks from Astarte is neither denied nor granted, again leaving Manfred in an ambiguous emotional state which he finds so intolerable. As a result of this interaction, Manfred's fragile ego is finally and irreversibly overwhelmed by his superego which demands oblivion for his sins. Manfred embraces Thanatos, the death drive, and rejects Eros the life instinct.¹¹ Of course, this is the only way that the scene between the two lovers could have played out, because ultimately as Marchand states: "the phantom [Astarte/Augusta] cannot forgive him because she is his [Byron's/Manfred's] own creation and he cannot forgive himself" (254). However, even though Manfred/Byron never receives the absolution that he desires from Astarte/Augusta, her response provides emotional separation from his sister/lover. The fixation is reduced and Byron can move forward and make other attachments. In this way, the psychodramatic exercise is useful to the author because it provides emotional catharsis and desensitization about his very real emotional problems.

Conclusion

The year 1816 was not only a time of loss and personal tragedy for Byron; it was also a time of personal and artistic freedom. His outrageous behavior had finally gotten him expelled from England, and he naturally felt a sense of loss and anger, but the artistic side of his personality reveled in the opportunities that were now open to him due to being free from the moral and artistic constraints of English society. *Manfred* was a first step on his path to psychological healing and liberation and new creative endeavors. Marchand puts it this way:

The composition had served its chief purpose: Byron had found the most effective

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that both Manfred and Astarte receive the traditional penalty for incest—which according to Yates is death.

¹¹ Thanatos is the drive toward death and destruction in Freudian psychological theory. For a complete description see Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *On Metapsychology*, Middlesex 1987.

relief for his guilt and despair. And he had discovered that his real quarrel with life was that he could not transcend the bounds of mortality; the “half deity” did not compensate for the “half dust” (254).

Here Marchand indicates that the play *Manfred* had a cathartic and healing effect on Byron’s psyche, and because of this healing, Byron was able to move forward with more productive pursuits. This view is supported by Sperry who states:

Manfred is the drama in which Byron symbolically works his way through to mental sanity, to the psychological perspective that made *Don Juan* possible. It is in short, a play of personal catharsis, a drama, as Harold Bloom has put it, “of the self, purged by the self” (189).

The year 1816 represents a line of demarcation for Byron. Up until that time, Byron created some important poetic works and a great deal of turmoil in the lives of the people with whom he came into contact. He was at least as well known for his outrageous antics as he was for his poetry. The years that followed were characterized by an unprecedented—both in terms of quantity and quality—level of artistic output. The poems that he wrote after he left England are considered by most critics to be his best, these include, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Darkness*, *Beppo*, the majority of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* (Byron’s Poetry). And although he still struggled with his own mercurial nature, Byron was also able to display empathy and find renewed humanistic purpose in his dedication to the cause of Greek independence. Perhaps the *Manfred* psychodrama had a truly restorative effect on the author, and through writing its pages he was able to gain the psychological clarity and health that he needed in order to become one of the most important poets of the Romantic era.

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