CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I

The Spirit of the Age: A study of the background

The emergence of romanticism in the literature of the early nineteenth-century England was not a sudden development. It was actually a cumulative effect of some causes both conceptual and circumstantial. To say that the Romantic Revival in the early nineteenth century was the outcome of a revolt against the neo-classical literary cult and practices is an oversimplification. The great Romantic Movement in arts and letters was simply the one phase of a greater and profounder ferment which appeared in the different fields of the eighteenth-century life and brought about revolutionary changes in politics, religion, social structure, literature and so on.

It may reasonably be thought, that such deep and wide ferment had (as it always has) behind it a strong support of some stout system of thought that created a common feeling of inadequacy of what was existing. This body of thought came partly from Rousseau, and mainly from the German Idealists — Kant, Fichte, Schelling who found inadequacy in the empiricism of Locke, Hume, Descartes, which together with the

1Burns, Edward McNall, Western Civilization: Their History and Their Culture, (New York, 1963). 5648.
mechanistic explanation of the universe by Newton created rational and scientific world-view of the neo-classical seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The German Idealists and the French thinker - Rousseau were responsible for creating forces that violently shook the Enlightenment world of thought. When Rousseau wrote in his Du Contrat Social, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." - he did much to usher in a sort of renaissance of mind that ultimately paved the way for political revolutions, by stressing the birth-right to individual liberty; when he wrote in Emile, "God made all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil." - Rousseau suggested return to nature. The German thought was of greater significance for the growth of romanticism. Kant thinks that the power of human reason is limited; Fichte finds the boundless potentialities of human imagination. "His assertion of the almost infinite powers of the imagination," writes Ralph Tymns, "appears to be a strong philosophical support and corroboration of the romantics' own intuitive belief in the absolute powers of the artist." Though Tymns maintains this view with the German Romantics in mind, yet it is none the less applicable to the English Romantics also. Schelling's conception of a harmonious partnership between man and nature, and his pantheistic idea - all collectively generated a spirit of challenge to the Enlightenment ideas, and created a new world-view for the Romantics - a world-view that favoured

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2Tymns, Ralph, German Romantic Literature, (London, 1955): p.15
individualism, subjectivity, return to nature, and gave rise to a spirit of man's political and social emancipation. In other words, these French and German thoughts glorified those basic elements of romanticism which manifested themselves later not only in the new literature and art of the early nineteenth century, but also in the other fields; the abstract thoughts ultimately took concrete shapes as time proceeded.

Towards the closing decades of the eighteenth century a revolutionary era began with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which not only turned the agrarian England into an industrial England, but also had far-reaching effects. "The Industrial Revolution was more than a change in the system of production; it was also a revolution in the conditions of life for entire sections of society." It created the middle class, aware of their rights, privileges, and power, and gradually prepared the conditions for the Reform Bill of 1832. The newly emerged middle class had new ideas and values. "A new sensibility entered into and began to change the arts," says Bronowsky, "the literature, and the thought of the period. The Industrial Revolution changed Western man from head to foot; and thence more deeply from head to heart." This wide change in the social structure and also in the mode and manner of living ultimately made the native classicism incompatible with the newly developed social realities, and called for re-appraisal of the aims, expression and function

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4 ibid. p.365.
In the field of politics, we find that the romantic spirit expressed itself and asserted its energy through the manifestation of the American Revolution and the French Revolution. There is no denying that the latter exerted tremendous influence on the Romantic literature of the early nineteenth-century England. Absolute Monarchy in politics is, so to say, a classical concept which cannot tolerate individualism of the subject. The two political revolutions on either side of the Atlantic - the American and the French were basically the same; in their spiritual aspects, it was the revolution of the same romantic idea of liberty, and self-determination or, in other words, individualism against the orthodox political dogmatism of Divine Right and Absolute Monarchy.

In religion too, the manifestation of the same romantic spirit is noticeable. It was first evident in the Pietism in Germany, which was followed by the Methodism in England in the eighteenth century. The essence of Pietism and Methodism is the same; both "belittled human reason, and laid great emphasis on developing the personal and emotional aspects of religion." The stress was laid, in other words, on those elements which are the essentials of romanticism.

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Against this vast and extensive background as briefly traced, the flowering of romanticism in English literature was possible. It was quite natural that when every field of life changed "from head to heart" under the same spirit of romanticism, literature was to be responsive to and compatible with the new realities of life. Thus, drenching the other fields of life suffering from a long drought of classical climate, romanticism came to drench literature; and the great Romantic Movement started with new mission, new ideas, and new expression quite unthinkable in the neo-classical period. Filtered through other fields, romanticism reached the field of literature in its finest and strongest form with special emphasis on the potentialities of artist's imagination, intuitive and emotional experiences, faith in the Rousseauistic concept of return to nature and so on. It was a concerted movement, because its ideal foundation was the German thought. "It is possible," says John B. Halsted, "to identify philosophies that seem closely congruent with the attitudes and ideas of Romanticism - much of Hegel, much of Schelling, much of Schopenhauer." It is not, of course, essential for us to prove the Romantics' actual acquaintance with that body of thought. Acquainted or, not acquainted, the Romantic poets show their spiritual link with that philosophic tradition; and it was possible, perhaps, much in the same way, as we know the ideas of Marxian Socialism even without reading Marx's Das Kapital.

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Romantic literature of the early nineteenth century is imaginative, as the neo-classical literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth was rational.¹

"If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century," says Sir Maurice Bowra, "it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it."²

The extreme faith in the creative, as well as, the real aspect of imagination may be found particularly in Keats. When Keats writes - "The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream, - he awoke and found it truth."³ - or, "My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk...",⁴ he makes the point all the more clear. The fundamental originality of the Romantic Movement lies, as Stephen Spender finds, in the poets' attitude to nature.⁵ To the Romantics, nature is one with their inner mind, and is not something

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³*Keats's Letters,* (To P.B. Shelley, 16 August, 1820).

external or, outward. They are interested in exploiting
the deep mysteries of nature and life, and are introspective
by nature; they are interested in unveiling the mystery of
the supernatural, and the past. The poets of the period are
egoists, extremely self-conscious of their genius and poetic
mission; they are revolutionaries both in life and art. The
general character of the Romantic literature is
individualistic, imaginative, natural and lyrical; and it is
for the general temper and tendencies of the romantic
atmosphere, that poetry found a very fertile soil to flourish,
and it is poetry in which the romanticism found completest
expression.

It is not wholly correct to label the age - the age
of Romantic Revival, keeping in mind the sixteenth century
romanticism. Because, the sixteenth-century romanticism was
neither self-conscious of its essential qualities, nor had
it behind a solid background of a body of concerted
metaphysical thoughts. The Renaissance opened the door of
romance, or rather excited an impulse of the writers to
indulge in romance, much in the same way as the youth excites
in man an impulse to romanticise men and things; a young
happy lover is not self-conscious when he compares his
mistress to a lily, or the moon; neither is he self-conscious
as to why he finds uncommon beauty in a moon-lit garden. It
only shows a mood - a sentiment, not romanticism; it is
romance - the gift of one's spring of life. The Renaissance
was, in a sense, a spring of the Elizabethan England,
as such, she experienced romance. Stephen Spender seems to have meant the same thing when he says -

"Romanticism only expresses only one mood of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton who have other and profounder moods."\(^{12}\)

But the later Romantics have no other mood so prominent as their romantic mood; they are cent per cent romantic. They are totally different from those earlier writers, as one thing is from another. There is immense and vast difference between the sixteenth-century romanticism (if we choose to call it) and the romanticism of the nineteenth in regard to poet's attitude to nature, the profundity of imagination, and ideas, the outlook upon life, world, poetry and poets' mission. To say that the nineteenth-century romanticism is the revival of the sixteenth is a rough statement, that takes no account of the profundity and actual originality of the romanticism of the nineteenth which is revolutionary in ideas and creation. This is the background against which the dramatic writings of these Romantic poets have to be judged. But the conditions of the Romantic theatre were not congenial to the ideas which this background inspired. Unfortunately theatre as an institution did not get informed - or enlivened by these ideas, may be because these ideas were too subjective or metaphysical for theatrical presentation. In fact, the theatre remained essentially a means of entertainment throughout the age, and great actors and

\(^{12}\)op. cit.
actresses that the age produced, usually displayed their histrionic skill mostly through the plays of writers of other ages. In any case, a brief account of the actual conditions of the early nineteenth-century English theatre at the stage will be helpful.

From theatrical point of view, early nineteenth century was an age of the actors - the Stars. Dramas were written, or had to be written for this, or that actor, or actress - Kean, Kemble, Miss O'Neill, Mrs. Siddon and the like. Drama was not an important thing to a dramatist; what was most important was to obtain approval of some actor, or actress who was then in the lime light in the theatre-world. It was invariably the case with the dramatists aspiring after stage success. Keats, for example, had to write Otho for Edmund Kean; Shelley wrote The Cenci for Miss O'Neill; Coleridge expressed his intention to write Osorio for Kemble and Mrs. Siddon.13

"The playwright had a subservient status," writes Dewey Ganzel, "in the early nineteenth century theatre. He in no sense collaborated with the proprietors of a theatre in the production of his play; his part was only to produce a saleable commodity."14

The point is further clarified by Joseph W. Donohue, Jr. when he says -


"The theater of the age was emphatically not a playwright's theater but an actor's theater, and the successful playwright was one with the knack of tailoring his piece to the abilities and tastes of the players."  

Right from the closing decades of the eighteenth century the English society underwent many changes due to the Industrial Revolution. The change of social conditions and the emergence of the middle class had inevitable effect on the world of the theatre. "A new audience comes into London theatre" writes Clive Barker, "between 1780 and 1830." This "new audience" consisted mainly of the newly emerged middle class, and there was a rapid growth of the theatre-going public. The increase in size of the audience made it necessary to alter the size of the playhouses. In and around 1787 The Theatre Royal in Covent Garden and Drury Lane were enlarged. But the character and quality of the new audience were not at all conducive to the development of drama in England.


"... the spectators in the larger theatres during the first decades of the century," writes Allardyce Nicoll, "were often licentious and debased, while those in the minor playhouses were vulgar, unruly and physically obnoxious."\(^\text{17}\)

Nicoll considers the audience of the then theatre worst for the drama:

"... but worst for the drama was the audience which playwright and player alike had to appeal to and please."\(^\text{18}\)

The condition of the playhouse was naturally extremely unwholesome for a man of refined taste and culture.

"Debauchery, fashionable vice, evils of all kinds," writes Nicoll, "centred in these houses of amusement, and the saner, soberer people who might have aided towards the elaboration of a finer drama were forced to keep themselves apart."\(^\text{19}\)

It is quite natural that such an audience of the early nineteenth-century theatre would have very little taste for finer drama. Sir Walter Scott is critical of the playgoers' taste when he writes to Miss Smith in a letter dated


\(^{18}\)Ibid.

\(^{19}\)Nicoll, Allardyce, *British Drama, 1962* p.201.
April 4, 1811.

"The ruinous monopoly of the two theatres necessarily excludes everything but show, and renders the managers absolutely dependent upon that class who have least real taste for the stage as an elegant amusement."20

The new audience of the Romantic theatre had no taste, as Dewey Ganzel tells us, for the classic tragedy and comedy. What they relished in was melodrama.

"The new audience demanded - and found - a new form, melodrama, which combined the catastrophic situation of tragedy with the happy resolution of comedy."21

George Rowell gives us further details about the taste and demand of the audience.

"The rowdy, illiterate new audience," writes Rowell, "crowded into the theatres, requiring their interest to be roused by vigorous action, their emotions moved by pathos, and their troubles soothed by happy ending. These demands had to be met as best as they could."22

Harry R. Beaudry also tells us that the audience "preferred comedy to serious drama - or to melodrama..."23 The general dramatic taste of the London audience in the early


nineteenth century can be imagined, when Beaudry writes -

"Playwrights of third rank or worse appealed to
the public and achieved some financial success..." 24

This and other comments of Nicoll and George Rowell lead us
to an assumption that the audiences of the London theatres
had little taste for finer drama. But when we find from
various records that Shakespeare's dramas were performed
(though not regularly), we simply get confused as to the
actual character and taste of the audience of these plays.
Perhaps, star actors could make Shakespeare tolerable to
them. Again, we are told by Nicoll that the audiences were
not devoid of moral sensibility. Nicoll finds this moral
sensibility among the critics, dramatists and spectators and
says, that "the aim (of the dramatists) naturally was to
please by inculcating some moral, to avoid offending public
taste." 25 This is further confirmed when we find, that
Shelley's The Cenci was rejected only on moral grounds.'

From the audience when we turn to the theatre, the
actual playhouse condition of the time, we find that the
enlargement of the Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres was
largely responsible for many dramatic evils. As the stage
went farther from the audience, the actors had to coarsen
their style of acting in order to be audible and visible to
the spectators in the farthest corner of the auditorium; and

24op. cit. 'p.42;

as such, subtle acting was rendered impossible. Nicoll thinks that this enlargement of the theatres was largely responsible for the growth of melodrama during the period;\textsuperscript{26} it also created tendency towards spectacular show.

Until 1843 the Drury Lane and the Covent Garden retained their patent right, and there was general struggle between the major and the minor playhouses of London and its metropolis. The Licensing Act was detrimental to the growth of drama, and restricted the scope of dramatic experiment during the period. Between the two major playhouses was also a good deal of rivalry, especially in regard to attracting and securing audiences. Besides, the theatre management was also partly to blame for allowing the tyranny of the star actors. Harry R. Beaudry thinks, that the troubles of the London theatre came mainly from two sources. He writes -

"The troubles of the London theatre, 1814-1821 and after, for Covent Garden as well as Drury Lane, came from two fundamental sources: (1) Edmund Kean, and (2) mono-polistic systems of theatre management that allowed the tyranny of such an individual to proceed with relative impunity. Public taste was not hostile to the Romantic ideal. The poets needed help in learning stage-craft. Kean and the theatre managers gave the wrong kind or none at all."\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26}Nicoll, Allardyce, \textit{British Drama}, 1962. pp.200-201.

\textsuperscript{27}Beaudry, op. cit. p.83.
Beaudry thinks, that for the decline of drama during the period, "the theatre, not the dramatist, was at fault."\(^{28}\) In fine, the total picture, as it is revealed, is dismal.\(^{\text{28}}\)

But in one respect, the early nineteenth-century theatre, however, made some improvement. In the art of theatre lighting and scenic devices the "age theatrically was an age of innovation."\(^{29}\) Gas was introduced to illumine the stage; "Scenic devices which had already been tried tentatively in the preceding age were now brought to perfection."\(^{30}\) Moreover, "Costume kept steady pace with this scenic art, which aimed, now at spectacle, now at realism, now at historical accuracy."\(^{31}\) And all these tended to add to the spectacular effect, that the age demanded and the management supplied. This was in short, the condition of the theatre in the early nineteenth century when the Romantics attempted their dramatic composition.

\(^{28}\) op. cit. p. 44.

\(^{29}\) Nicoll, Allardyce, *A History of English Drama*, IV, p. 34.

\(^{30}\) op. cit. p. 35.

\(^{31}\) op. cit. p. 40.
II

It is interesting to study the Romantic poets' in relation to the theatre. The Romantics, like the dramatic authors of the time, also made occasional attempts at dramatic composition; they had also theatrical ambition and interest, witnessed theatrical performances, expressed dramatic thoughts and opinion about their own and others' dramas. The dramatic essays of the Romantic poets, for their relation to the authors' life and thought, do deserve due attention, as they deserve due place in the history of the development of English drama; for their importance lies in determining a phase of the early nineteenth-century English drama and theatre. The present study aims more at examining the Romantics' dramatic works with reference to the theatrical qualities than at thematic interpretation.

Almost all of these Romantic poets had an ambition for writing drama. All of them tried their hand at playwriting on occasions, and some of them were quite enthusiastic in bringing about a dramatic revolution. The Romantic poets of England were aware of the decadent state of the contemporary English drama and theatre, and it will not be wrong to assume, that this awareness, among other things, led some of them to dramatic composition with a view to setting the thing right. Keats expressed his desire of bringing about "as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has
done in acting;" his interest in and preparation for writing "a few fine plays" can distinctly be noticed.\textsuperscript{33} Shelley's interest in writing plays, and his theatrical ambition can be traced in his letters, and prefaces to his plays. Besides, the notes and Journals of Mrs. Shelley throw sufficient light on her husband's dramatic interest, idea and ambition. Shelley's reading of the Greek dramatists, like Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, the Spanish dramatist - Calderon, and the English dramatists, both old and new indicates, among other things, his silent preparation for dramatic authorship. Of all the major poets of the period, it is Lord Byron, who took up drama most seriously, and followed a definite dramatic plan based on sound ideas and conception, and carried on with his mission with confidence and enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{34}

"I want to make a regular English drama," writes Byron, "no matter whether for the Stage or not, which is not my object, - but a mental theatre."

Byron's letters and Journals, his prefaces to the plays, his Address spoken at the opening of the new Drury Lane Theatre on October 12, 1812 - all point the way to a higher

\textsuperscript{32}Keats's Letters, (To Bailey, 14 Aug. 1819), Letter No.142.

\textsuperscript{33}op. cit. (To John Taylor, 17 Nov.1819), Letter No.166.

dramatic mission of Lord Byron; they indicate a mind bent upon raising drama from a state of crisis to a level of pride and glory. Wordsworth and Coleridge and Sir Walter Scott had also their dramatic interest, and wrote plays, though unlike their juniors, they had neither their definite dramatic interest and aim, nor had they taken up dramatic composition in like spirit and with similar seriousness. In the age of Romanticism in England, the elder generation of the poets seem to have shown no well-defined dramatic scheme, and their occasional attempts at drama may be thought to have been sustained by no genuine ambition for bringing about any dramatic revolution. Of the minor poets of the period, Joanna Baillie and Thomas Lovell Beddoes deserve mention in this context. Baillie, like Byron, had very decided views upon drama. She had her definite, though not perfect, dramatic scheme and aim; she aimed at dramatic originality and directed her dramatic efforts towards the same goal which Lord Byron wanted to reach in his own way. In other words, both the poet-dramatists intended to be original and do some good to their dying national drama. Beddoes, like others, was thoroughly conscious that the contemporary English drama cried for reform, and was a "haunted ruin" in which the ghost of the Elizabethans and the Jacobaeans revel at large.  
His dramatic interest led him to look for the way in which dramatic reform might be effected. 

reverence for all the antiquities of the drama," he writes, "I still think that we had better beget than revive - attempt to give the literature of this age in idiosyncrasy and spirit of its own and only raise a ghost to gaze on, not to live with - just now the drama is a haunted ruin." Beddoes, it is evident, indicated his confident approach to the problem, though the solution suggested remained only a theory; he, as a playwright, worked under the strong influence of the Elizabethans whom he wanted to avoid, like Lord Byron. Beddoes alone was not at fault. The Romantic poets, both major and minor, were at fault in this regard in varying degrees. 

It is hard to agree with George Watson, in toto, who remarks that the chief motive of the Romantic poets in writing plays was "commonly financial," and that they "shunned in drama all thoughts of the experimental." The available records show that some of the Romantics, especially Shelley, Keats, Byron and Miss Joanna Baillie had genuine dramatic interest, and in writing drama their primary consideration was not financial. Byron, Shelley and Joanna Baillie also in their own way, experimented with drama. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and the fragment - *Charles The First* are the results of such experimentation. "It is a drama," writes Shelley about *Prometheus Unbound.*

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36 Ibid.

"with characters and mechanism of a kind yet unattempted."\textsuperscript{38}
This shows Shelley's attempt at dramatic experimentation, rather than imitation; the poet was also conscious, that this experiment would not pay him in terms of money. "I think, if I may judge by its merits," he writes to his publisher - Charles Ollier (March 6, 1820), "the 'Prometheus' cannot sell beyond twenty copies."\textsuperscript{39} In \textit{Charles The First}, Shelley aimed at a higher level (vide Letter to Leigh Hunt, Jan. 25, 1822).\textsuperscript{,} Lord Byron's dramatic experiment was most robust and most well-founded. He declared in clear terms that his plays were intended for the mental theatre. "It is an experiment," writes Byron, "whether the English Closet or mental theatre will or will not bear a regular drama instead of the melodrama."\textsuperscript{40} Further, in a letter to Murray (dated July 22, 1821), Byron writes on his experiment with unities - "Mind the unities, which are my great object of research."\textsuperscript{41} These and other records prove undoubtedly, that Byron's dramatic experiment was serious and sincere, and that through this, he neither wanted to make money, nor did he aim


\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Shelley's Letters}, ed. Jones, II. 551.\textsuperscript{,}


\textsuperscript{41}\textit{Letters and Journals}, V. 439. p.203.
at cheap public applause. When Keats writes, that one of his ambitions is to make a revolution in modern dramatic writing, and his "greatest ambition" is to write "a few fine plays," he certainly sounds serious; his sincere zeal in making serious dramatic experiment is implied there, though his Otho The Great is not the play, born of this intended experimentation. What we feel is that Otho should not be taken very seriously to prove what Keats has done, or could have done as a playwright. Keats's "fine plays," one may think, have remained actually half-written or unwritten; his ambition has remained unfulfilled, and his actual dramatic experiment, or endeavour came to an abrupt end. This is not to suppose, that Keats could definitely have contributed substantially to the development and revitalization of English drama if he had a longer span of life. That is a question of ability which will be discussed in the proper place. What is evident here is that he had no lack of sincerity and seriousness of purpose. Miss Joanna Baillie was equally serious in her experiment with drama. Her plays on Passion show quite distinctly her systematic approach to dramatic composition; her following of a dramatic theory, though a little rigid perhaps, like Ben Jonson's theory of Humour, is nevertheless sincere and original. In a word, one may maintain that most of the Romantic poets, contrary to what George Watson finds, rather attached nominal importance to the monetary interest as playwrights, and that there was no lack of sincerity of purpose from
their side. They were serious experimentors of drama in their own way.1

But despite these ambitious experimentations by some of the Romantics, the fact remains that, these poets of the early nineteenth century could not practically contribute much to the public theatre of their time. In no other age, perhaps, do we find the authors writing for the stage with so little or no thought of the living theatre. Only Keats, Coleridge and partly, Shelley with a sort of half-hearted intention sought to relate their dramas to the theatre of their time. But it was also a mere wish with no practical success (except in the case of Coleridge's Remorse). When Byron declares, that he has written plays for the theatre of the mind, he, as a matter of fact, pin-points a very important general truth about all the poet-dramatists of the Romantic Age. It is this "mental theatre" which consciously or unconsciously remained, all along, an ideal before the eyes of these poets, and their desire for theatrical adaptability in some cases, seems to be actually not quite sincere. With some lone exceptions, the poets of this period are found to have projected in dramatic terms some pet abstract ideas, or notions of their own. Wordsworth's The Borderers, Coleridge's Remorse, Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and Hellas, Byron's Cain and Heaven and Earth, testify to this fact. "The 'Remorse' is certainly a great favourite of mine," says Coleridge, "the more so as certain pet abstract notions of mine are therein expounded."42

In a letter to Charles Ollier (March 6, 1820), Shelley writes: "Prometheus Unbound*, I must tell you, is my favourite poem; ........ I think, if I may judge by its merits, the 'Prometheus' cannot sell beyond twenty copies." The reason why it is "favourite" and will not "sell beyond twenty copies," may be found from Mrs Shelley who writes:

"Shelley develops, more particularly in the lyrics of this drama, his abstruse and imaginative theories with regard to the Creation. It requires a mind as subtle and penetrating as his own to understand the mystic meanings scattered throughout the poem."

In a letter to John Murray (Feb. 16, 1821), Lord Byron indicates the general character of his plays and his own attitude as a playwright; he writes:

"You say The Doge (Marino Faliero) will not be popular: did I ever write for popularity? I defy you to show a work of mine of a popular style or complexion."

His Cain, like Manfred is in the "metaphysical style," and Heaven and Earth, though "less speculative than Cain, would have been popular, had they been more loved."

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45 Letters and Journals, V. 412, p. 127.


is based on the abstract ideas or notions of its author, like the other two plays. Sir Walter Scott and Keats had, of course, no abstract ideas to project in drama; but Scott had an irresistible passion for antiquity, and led by this, Scott sought to illustrate through his plays (except The House of Aspen) the antiquity of Scotland. He also in his own way runs after his own fancy. Scott shows his mind in a letter to Miss Smith and writes - "If I were to write anything for the stage, it would be for the delight of dressing the characters after my own fancy."^48

Whatever be the motive, the ultimate effect in each case is the same; all of these poets were drawn by a spirit obedient to their inward self, towards the theatre of the mind. In other words, the pleasure of their mind, it seems, is all that matters most to them; the public pleasure or interest is not of much consideration to these poet-dramatists of the early nineteenth century. This peculiar general attitude of the Romantics has given birth^16 a body of plays having a peculiar, and sometimes, an extra-dramatic character.

The Romantic poets were, so to say, kept out of the contemporary stage; and it is only Coleridge who, among the major poets of the period, was able to get his temporary entry into the Drury Lane with his Remorse. This fact does not necessarily go to prove, that the dramatic works of the

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Romantics are all unactable. There are some plays (besides, Remorse) which could have been admitted for stage-performance, and these plays are Coleridge's Zapolya; Shelley's The Cenci, Byron's Marino Faliero, Sardanapalus, Manfred; Scott's The House of Aspen and The Doom of Devorgoil; Keats's Otho the Great, and Gripus. Even Wordsworth's The Borderers too could have been staged with some minor alterations. But even these also were rejected by the theatre-managers, sometimes showing the reasons for rejection, and the reasons given are enlightening. Shelley's The Cenci was rejected by the Drury Lane "on a plea of the story being too horrible," and by Mr. Harris of Covent Garden on the ground, that the subject is "so objectionable that he could not even submit the part to Miss O'Neil for perusal;" and it is not hard to conjecture as to where lies the objection. The puritanic sentiment of the age actually could not tolerate its theme of incest. This is quite evident in a contemporary review of the play:

"The pollution of a daughter by a father," writes the reviewer; "---- the murder of a father by his wife and daughter, are events too disgusting to be moulded into any form capable even of awakening our


50Shelley, Mary, Notes on The Cenci. (Vide Shelley's Works, p. 337)."
The rejection of *The Cenci* makes it apparent, that this play could not make its way on to the stage of the contemporary theatre not for its being unactable, but for its theme being offensive to the taste of the general run of the contemporary theatre managers and playgoers. The exceptional acceptance of Coleridge's *Remorse* at Drury Lane may be thought to have been due more to Lord Byron's influence as an active member of the Drury Lane's Committee of Management; and had it not been accepted and performed, we would not have been able to know today, that Coleridge was able to write a play that proved its success on the contemporary stage for twenty nights at a stretch. Scott's *The House of Aspen* was rejected on the plea "that the main spring of the story, - the binding engagements formed by members of the secret tribunal, - might not be sufficiently felt by an English audience,....." These and other cases of rejection by the contemporary London theatres point out various factors responsible for the Romantics' undesirable aloofness from the living theatre; and the factors were obviously both external and internal to these poets themselves. The Romantic poets of England were sometimes kept out of the stage, and sometimes, they (especially, Lord Byron) did not

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like to go in, and either of the causes might have resulted
in creating an ever-widening gulf between these poets and
the theatre, preventing reciprocal co-operation to the
greater interests of their national drama.

Lord Byron's aloofness from the theatre was
extra-ordinarily deliberate and peculiar. Byron had his own
reasons for keeping his dramatic effort away from the living
theatre. It is not difficult to find that it was the
over-all unhealthy conditions of the London theatre that
disappointed Lord Byron, and formed his most uncompromising
attitude to the theatre. For it was hard for a Romantic
egoist, like Byron, to submit himself not only to the pleasure
of the star-actors, but also to the degenerated taste of the
notorious theatrical audience of the time. "And I cannot
conceive," writes Byron, "any man of irritable feeling
putting himself at the mercies of an audience."53 For Byron,
it was more intolerable to submit to the taste and judgment,
especially of an audience who were ignorant and about whose
power and competence of judgment he was doubtful.54 Byron's
bitter experience seems to have been intensified during the
period when he was close to the affairs of the Drury Lane.

"Were I capable of writing a play," he writes,
"which could be deemed stageworthy, success would give
me no pleasure, and failure great pain."55

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53Byron, Preface to Marino Faliero. (Vide The Poetical
p.466, hereafter cited as Byron's Works.)
54Ibid.
It will not be unreasonable to think, that probably this prevailing condition of the contemporary public theatre of London chiefly drove Byron to the "mental theatre." The very same conditions may also be taken to explain, if not wholly, at least partially, the Romantics' general indifference towards the living theatre of the age.

These and other records not only explain the Romantics' spirit of non-co-operation with the living theatre, but they also help us to trace the seat of malady of the Romantic theatre of the early nineteenth century to some extent. Recent researches by Harry R. Beaudry trace, as it is pointed out earlier in this chapter, the source of the trouble of the London theatre not so much in the taste and character of the audience as in the star-system and the management. Beaudry does not think that the public taste was hostile to the finer drama. He maintains quite unequivocally - "Public taste was not hostile to the Romantic ideal." But Beaudry, while relying upon his records, has actually ignored the statements of the poets of the period, which may also be accepted as no less reliable a source of information than his. It is rather likely that when almost all the poets complain of the then audience, there is some truth in the complaint. Moreover, it seems to be a little absurd proposition that the audience was in favour of finer drama, while the actors and the managers of the commercial theatres of London gave them what their bread-givers did not

want and like. Rather, what is most natural is that, the popular taste corrupted the actors and the management, and they, in turn, corrupted the drama and the dramatists of the period.'

This corrupt atmosphere of the theatre seems to be the most important factor external to the poet-dramatists of the age, causing the most glaring cleavage between these poets and the theatre. It was not easy for the Romantics, conscious of their high artistic mission and genius, to come to terms with it in a self-effacing manner, and accept the sub-ordinate role assigned to the playwrights. Their relation to the living theatre was, therefore, one of non-co-operation and indifference. One may think that this kind of relation of the major writers of the age was largely responsible for the creation of a mass of "Closet" drama (though many of them are stageworthy) which was able to defy both the "Stars" and the obnoxious audience and enabled these poets to carry on with their dramatic composition without pandering to the evils of the playhouse they complained of. And they took to this as the only possible alternative in the existing circumstances. Of course, Byron's closet plays (as he himself calls them) had deep significance to Byron as a dramatic reformer. To create a few closet plays, in other words, to write for the "mental theatre" was the part and parcel of his programme of dramatic reform.'

But the factors external to them alone cannot fully explain their keeping out of the theatre. There were also deeper causes and factors inherent in these poets themselves.'
It will have to be admitted that the Romantic poets did not have strength enough to turn the tide in their favour. It has been argued that the greater dramatists in the past also found before them chaotic and unhealthy conditions of the theatre and drama, but they did not turn away in contempt; they accepted the conditions first, and reformed the Stage later. There is no denying the fact that the Romantics, in this respect, were unlike those "greater dramatists." The Romantics faced the problems, but unlike their greater predecessors, some of them kept away from the theatre, and turned to the "mental theatre," while a few others like Coleridge and Keats sought to give way to the conditions of the theatre they disliked. It is, no doubt, a reasonable argument. But in this connection one should also take into account the extent and variety of the problems confronting the Romantics. It is quite true, that none of these poets was born with the native gifts and power of the greater dramatists of the past. Besides, the general tendencies of the age, created largely by the interactions of the different socio-political and economic forces were different; the general character, taste and mental attitude of the actual patrons of drama were also not the same, and the problems confronted by the Romantics were undoubtedly vaster than those faced by the greater dramatists of the earlier times. Above all, the peculiar characteristics and mental attitude of the

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Romantics - their sovereign egoism, their attitude to life and art, their mind and thought, their temperament - all together made the total situation quite different from that of their earlier, or later ages. Taking all these factors into account one may find it difficult to make these poets solely responsible for their not coming to terms with the contemporary Stage. The desirable compromise was not there, and it was not possible too. Their own mental make-up and above all, their sense of superiority and faith in their own talent, perhaps, did not allow the poets to come down from their high horse to lift drama up from the notorious nadir. Byron becomes the mouth-piece, one may say, of the Romantics when he writes in the preface to Marino Faliero -

*And I cannot conceive any man of irritable feeling putting himself at the mercies of an audience.* The sneering reader, and the loud critic, and the tart review, are scattered and distant calamities; but the trampling of an intelligent or of an ignorant audience on a production which, be it good or bad, has been a mental labour to the writer, is a palpable and immediate grievance, heightened by a man's doubt of their competency to judge, and his certainty of his own imprudence in electing them his judges...... It is for this reason that, even during the time of being one of the committee of one of the theatres, I never made the attempt, and never will."^{59}

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^{59}Byron's Works, pp. 466-67.
Byron's mind and attitude are vividly revealed in this observation; his egoism, sense of superiority, his contempt for the contemporary theatrical audience, his distrust in the audience's power of and capacity for judging a drama and his contemptuous indifference to the dramatist's success or failure to be determined by such incompetent judges - are a clear answer to the general question as to why the Romantics in general remained, or tended to remain at arm's length from the world of the living theatre. Extremely individualists and egoists as they were, they seem to have thought, that their instinctive knowledge would be sufficient to turn out as playwrights; they were, in general averse to learning their art as dramatists from the theatre of the time. Boleslaw Taborski, in his illuminating book, *Byron And the Theatre,* writes -

"The romantic poets, however, even when they had talent, were reluctant to learn. This is not surprising. It was only natural for the individualists and rebels against the accepted conventions to shun the theatre of their day, and, as far as purely dramatic considerations were concerned, accept no rules or theories but their own." 60

This tendency, psychological in its basis, was constantly drawing these poets away from the living theatre of the age,

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60 Taborski, Boleslaw, *Byron And The Theatre,* (Salzburg, 1972), p.3.
and their occasional ambition to the contrary (as in some cases), was no more than mere half-hearted aspiration, too weak to keep the tendency in check.

A study of the plays written by these poets clearly show some other tendencies. These poets were, more or less, interested in the historical subjects taken from the distant past; the past had its sway upon their mind so much so that the modern world became mostly insignificant to them. Excepting Coleridge in *Robespierre* and Shelley in *Swellfoot* and *Hellas*, none of these poets found for his plays a modern social or political theme; it had no appeal to them. Even Shelley also does not fully deserve the credit in this regard. For, though modern social or political events inspired Shelley to write *Swellfoot*, and *Hellas* (as Wordsworth, we are told, was inspired to write *The Borderers*), yet the story was taken, in each case, from the distant historical past, or from the distant dramatic tradition, and the modernity of these plays remains only in the idea, not in the dramatic events. They could not even treat a historical - or mythical subject in terms of modern sensibility as for instance, Eliot did in his *Murder in the Cathedral*.

There is no reason to believe that such theme which might have given some contemporary interest to their plays were wanting in the period. As a matter of fact, enough of such themes was there both at hand and also in the continent. The revolutionary happenings in France and socio-economic consequences could have been considered dramatically promising.
But excepting a very weak attempt in Coleridge's *The Fall of Robespierre*, the history and society of France during and after the troubled period had no trace in the dramas of the Romantics. Besides, what was there at home was also worth reckoning. Especially from the latter half of the eighteenth century, i.e. from the reign of George III, many socio-economic and political changes took place. The inventions of science and technology had all their inevitable effects on the economy and the social structure of England, giving rise to all possible social conflicts. For obvious reasons, the time was not one of synthesis on the social plane, and as such, the climate so created was dramatically not less promising than that of the Renaissance England. But the Romantics were giving their readers (who are supposed to be the audience of their mental theatre) plays on the mediaeval themes and situation, on the Biblical subjects, on abstract and metaphysical ideas, and such advantages provided by the socio-political and economic changes, opening a new vista of dramatic possibilities, were ignored and not utilized for dramatic purposes. It may be thought, that their successful utilization of these advantages might have brought them closer to the living theatre to a considerable extent. "Thus it happens," says Samuel C. Chew, "that the poetic drama, though more serious than the stage-plays, was almost equally removed from life; ....... It was as far removed as possible from realism."\(^{61}\) It may also be that on the conceptual level

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the romantic world-view did not admit of any real conflict, and the poets were so sure of the unity of their vision of life that they could easily ignore the thwarting social realities. And so they turned to past events for dramatic themes. The Romantics' preference for the serious drama is also a marked tendency. Often their choice of a tragic story indicates the Romantics' abiding interest in tragic drama; their general preference for tragedy is quite clear. The reason for this might well be that, some of them just dramatized their own mental conflicts for a kind of cathartic effect, and the tragic note was only an aspect of the romantic melancholia. But it is also obvious that, their attempts at tragedy often betray their inability to reach the depth of true tragedy. The Romantics' extra-ordinary interest in the psychic life of man might have governed their choice of the serious drama, which alone was able to offer them scope for emotional expression, passionate poetry, and psychological treatment. Allied to this was a tendency not less common, of adopting a story based on Guilt-and-Remorse theme - a theme that deals with some psychological problems. A good many plays of these poets undisputedly testify to this point. Besides, in a good number of plays, the revolutionary thoughts and ideas have been given dramatic expression. Chew is certainly correct when he says in a general way - "In this whole group of plays there is found, broadly speaking, some aspect or other
of revolutionary thought. Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, Coleridge's *Robespierre*, the plays of Shelley, and most of the plays of Byron are replete with this; The plays of Scott and Keats, of course, do not fall into this category. Their interest in dramatization of the revolutionary ideas may be regarded as an effect of the French Revolution which served as an added impetus to the Romantic poets' basic revolutionary spirit; the revolutionary happenings in France express themselves in most of their plays, and it is in idea, not in dramatic events that we are to trace their reflection.

It will not be out of place, to mention that the romantic dramas of the early nineteenth-century poets, despite their authors' occasional claim to originality, are not totally free from the influence of the tradition. They are the works at once created by the combined forces of the man and the moment. By this we mean, that both the spirit of the time and the tradition, and the individual talents have been fused together in the creation of these dramas. The Elizabethan and the Gothic melodramatic influences are mainly the two powerful forces that are seen at work behind these works, and represent the force of tradition. The melodramatic tradition of the German dramas, mainly, of Kutzblue, Goethe, Schiller, and Lessing known through translation to the British public is supposed to have exerted influence on the dramatic

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taste of the time. With this stream met a no less stronger current flowing from a separate, but not very different source of the grotesque. And even the poets of the period, however individualists they were, could not remain, it seems outside this influence. Bertrand Evans' careful and authoritative study of the dramas from Horace Walpole to Percy Bysshe Shelley clarifies fully the point. The debt of the Romantics to the Gothic dramatic tradition is quite considerable, and none of these poets remained free from borrowing from this source. "Gothic villain and Romantic hero," says D.P. Varma, "come of the same lineage. ....... the whole machinery of Mrs. Radcliffe and the authors of her school furnished the pattern and set the style for poets of the succeeding generation." Similarly, the influence of the Elizabethan dramatic tradition is equally discernible in the dramas of these poets. Sometimes, it has been candidly admitted by some of the poets; the imitation of Shakespeare in some cases was somewhat conscious. But often the Shakespearean influence entered into the dramatic composition of the Romantics even unconsciously. Not even Lord Byron, who thought that the old dramatists "are full of gross faults," and who was "not an admirer of our old dramatists as models" was an exception. Byron's attitude to the "old dramatist" (obviously,

63 Evans, Bertrand, Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley, (California Univ, 1947)


65 Letters and Journals, V.405. (To Murray, Jan.4, 1821).

66 Op. cit. V.419. (To Shelley, April 26, 1821.)
including Shakespeare) cannot speak normally of his conscious imitation of Shakespearean style. Byron was against the revival of Elizabethan drama, and it was, perhaps, for this reason that he could not appreciate Shelley's monumental achievement - The Cenci. Shakespeare was too strong an influence to be absolutely set aside. Plenty of records (such as the letters and diaries of these poets and also of their friends and relatives, the biography of the poets, etc.) are available to show, that most of the Romantics studied Shakespeare with love and enthusiasm. Besides, they witnessed Shakespearean performances or tried to produce Shakespeare (as Byron did in Pisa). It is, therefore, very likely that the plot, pattern, character, and even the verbal part of this Elizabethan dramatist moulded the dramatic thoughts, style, execution and expression, sometimes without making the Romantics conscious of the imitation. Concrete examples in support of this view have been given in the chapters dealing with the plays of the individual poets. But it must be said that the Romantics were able to imitate only the surface mannerism of the Elizabethan dramatists; they could not reach their depth. Nicoll also gives his verdict on this point in clear terms:

"In their plays, therefore," writes Nicoll, "the poets blindly followed the Elizabethan dramatists without capturing their tone." 68

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But Nicoll's opinion, we think, should be accepted with some reservation; for his statement that the poets of the period "blindly followed the Elizabethan dramatists" does not seem to be fully correct. Blind following presupposes conscious imitation, which was normally not possible for the egoistic and individualistic poets, like the Romantics who were (at least a few) always conscious of making their mark as dramatic authors. At least Byron's plays, in particular, do not show this conscious imitation. He was, to some extent, a disciple of Shakespeare without knowing it. G. Wilson Knight only indirectly admits it, when he says, that "he (Byron) was saturated in Shakespeare," and if it is so, this saturation was not definitely without its imaginable effects on Byron.

Of all the Romantic poet-dramatists, Coleridge's debt to Shakespeare is the greatest; he wanted to imitate him in his plays, but failed - a case of somewhat direct imitation with unsatisfactory result.

"I tried to imitate his (Shakespeare's) manner in the Remorse," writes Coleridge, "and, when I had done, I found I had been tracking Beaumont and Fletcher and Massinger instead." In Zópolya, Coleridge tried to imitate Shakespeare's Winter's Tale. The debt of Shelley and Keats to Shakespeare comes next to that of Coleridge, but Shelley and Keats seem to be unconscious of their borrowings.


The dramatic works of the Romantic poets have, generally speaking, a poetic character, and this is due to their authors' inherent strengths and weaknesses governing and determining their structure, content and character. To turn to the dramas of the Romantic period, says G. Wilson Knight, is "to revert to nihilism and nightmare." The remark is a little exaggerated one equating the dramas of these poets somewhat with the Romantic poetry, and is, therefore, a discomforting one for us. Though poetically rich, the plays of the Romantics are far from nihilistic and night-marish. Knight's comment amounts to the complete denial of the dramatic potentialities of the Romantics' plays, and strikes a contradictory note, especially when we find that Knight finds in Byron "a dramatist of Shakespearian calibre." 

"... and each drama (of Byron)," says Knight, "in Shakespearian wise, shows its poetical and action in a natural, human and cosmic context. Only one so saturated in the dramatic as Byron could have made so purposeful and Apollonian a drama without loss of contact with the Dionysian sources of dramatic power." 

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It is, of course, undeniable that in the dramas of the Romantics, the emotional experiences, the visions and ideas of the poets have sometimes found poetic utterances as in *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hellas*, *Heaven and Earth*, or in *Cain*; but is this the whole truth? These few plays cannot characterise the entire body of the plays written by the Romantics; there are others which defy Knight's observation and lead us to a conviction that the Romantic poetry and the Romantic drama are different, and that the dramatic world of these poets is not the world of nihilism.

There is, no doubt, dramatic defect, as well as imperfection in these plays due to certain factors. A.C. Bradley has tried to trace the source of this imperfection and maintains —

"It may be suggested then, that the excellence of the lyric poetry of Wordsworth's time, and the imperfections of the long narratives and dramas, may have a common origin."74

Bradley, by this remark, refers not only to the authors' romantic temperament responsible for their dramatic imperfection, but also admits indirectly the extra-poetic character of their plays; he also seems to be influenced by the plays of the *Prometheus* group. In so far as these plays are concerned, Bradley is quite right; he is also right in general, when he hints at the source of the imperfection. But what we have to say is that, there are a number of plays

of these poets (quite different in character from the plays of the Prometheus-group) wherein the authors, despite their romantic temperament, have come nearer to perfection, wherein these poets have been able to hold their poetic imagination and lyric mood greatly in check. But the dramatic merit of these plays has often been overlooked by many a critic and scholar, showing a conspicuous lack of proper and discriminating judgment.

The Romantic poets tend to relish poetry, it is true. But it is also true that as dramatists they have not always allowed themselves to be carried away by their poetic mood. Exceptionally romantic as they were, these poets often showed their playing with the romantic mood, and preference for poetry in drama. This preference for poetry, we believe, is not accidental; it is based on a strong belief. In A Defence of Poetry Shelley has thrown some light on the matter:

"The corruption," Shelley says, "which has been imputed to the drama as an effect, begins, when the poetry employed in its constitution ends."

Obviously, the purpose which dramatic poetry serves in Shakespeare, for example, is not quite the same here in the Romantic poetic drama; poetry is something more to the Romantic poets. The Romantic poets were conscious of the

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sublimest function of poetry, and it is, perhaps, their faith in the edifying power of poetry that might have remained behind their preference for poetry in drama. Their emphasis on poetry was, therefore, conscious; and where the balance between poetry and drama is lost to the detriment of the latter, the Romantics, we find, do not hesitate to call the piece a "dramatic poem," or a "poem" and the like.

It must be admitted that the Romantics with the exception of Lord Byron had very little knowledge of the practical world of the theatre. None of these poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Shelley and Keats studied theatre in a way that might improve their dramatic art and technique. Most of them, as records show, visited theatres, witnessed theatrical performances on occasions, but none of them was closely associated with the life and activities of the theatre-world. Lord Byron's case was, of course, different. He took part in theatrical performance, and was reckoned a good actor even in his early days in school and college, and what was more, he was later an active member of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane Sub-Committee of Management, and had close connection with the actors and playwrights.

"Byron came to Drury Lane with a knowledge of the rudiments of acting, and with a knowledge of drama and theatre derived from extensive reading

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76 Byron, Letters and Diaries, II. p.635.
and theatre-going. His part in the Sub-Committee where, as we have seen, he worked hard and in various capacities, gave him useful experience.\textsuperscript{77}

Taborski's laborious research enables us to shake off all doubt about Byron's interest in and connection with the world of the theatre. He concludes with the view that the dramatist in him grew out of Byron the man of the theatre.\textsuperscript{78} Byron's position in this respect, therefore, cannot be equated with that of any of his fellow poets. He is a lone example among the Romantic poets, who set his hand at playwriting with preparation. Others' theatrical knowledge was, so to say, theoretical.

"If Wordsworth, Shelley, or Browning desired theatrical success," says George Rowell, "they made no attempt to study the theatre in which that success must be won."\textsuperscript{79}

Recent researches by Dr. Sheila Uttam Singh in Shelley, and by Harry R. Beaudry in Keats have been able to show these poets' deep interest in witnessing theatrical performances, association with actors, playwrights theatrical reviewers, but not in studying the theatre from inside, or taking part in theatrical performance. And, as mere witnessing cannot be

\textsuperscript{77}Taborski, op. cit. pp.74-5.

\textsuperscript{78}Op. cit. pp.19-75.

\textsuperscript{79}Rowell, George, op. cit. p.38.
supposed to make a practical dramatist, we consider their training only theoretical. This general lack of practical training and the romantic temperament are mainly responsible for whatever dramatic imperfections are there in their plays, while the unwholesome conditions of the theatre were mainly responsible for these poets' recoiling from the Stage-life.

The Romantics' "failure" as dramatists which is often heard, has remained actually a vague proposition even to-day. It has not been properly defined, and the term "failure" is often used loosely, and sometimes irresponsibly. The Romantics' failure as dramatists is actually a half-truth; it needs clarification and proper definition as to the extent and nature of their failure. An examination of their plays persuades one to think that they are not all unactable or unstageable plays, and this fact lends one into a belief, that the Romantics in general know how to write a drama - a belief, though seemingly challenging in itself, is not without factual evidence. Where the plays are unactable, their authors have called them "Poem in dialogue," "Dramatic Poem," or "Poem," and the like. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound, Hellen*, and *Swellfoot The Tyrant*; Byron's *Manfred, Cain, Heaven and Earth*, for example, may fall into this group; others can be accommodated in the stage, if one so desires it. It is clear from his letters and journals, that Lord Byron received several offers from some of the London
theatres, from some of his friends and admirers also, regarding the staging of some of his plays; Byron did not, however, accept the offer. Moreover, the elaborate stage-history of Byron's plays, as given by Boleslaw Taborski in his book - *Byron And The Theatre* shows, that even after the death of the poet, his plays were staged with great success during the 19th Century, as well as in our time. They were received on the stage both at home, and also in the various European countries and America. Shelley's *The Cenci* has also a long stage-history. Coleridge's *Remorse* and *Zapolya*; Keats's *Otho the Great* were also staged. Wordsworth and Scott, as far as we know, have not been able to find a place on the stage, but even then, some of the plays of Scott - *The House of Aspen*, *The Doom of Devorgoil*, and Wordsworth's *The Borderers* can also be performed. With some alteration and adjustment, the plays of the Romantics can be presented on the stage by a worthy producer. If this be the fact, how can we say, that the Romantics failed totally as dramatists; that they did not know how to write plays for the stage; that they had no dramatic sense and dramatic talent at all? The Age which found a drama, like *The Cenci* rejectable, and approved plays of much inferior sort by authors of far less merit cannot, we think, be trusted with setting the right standard

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80 Taborski, op. cit. pp.152-326.

81 Stuart Curran's detailed study is illuminating in this and other respects. Vide Shelley's *Cenci: A Scorpion Ringed with Fire* (1970) by the same author.
for measuring dramatic merit of a play. On The Cenci Stuart Curran's comment is very significant. "...The Cenci," says Curran, "remains the most significant serious play of its century written in English, the single work capable, had conditions of the stage allowed its enactment, of serving as the focal point for the revival of a true poetic drama in the nineteenth century. It is "a greater play," Curran further says, "than any of Lord Byron's," a play, though rejected by the contemporary theatres, is universally recognised as a great tragedy. And we think, that it is the theatre of the time which is to blame for its rejection, and Shelley's place as a dramatist is secure. Now it is not hard to trace as to where lies the Romantics' actual 'failure'. The Romantics' failure (if the term is 'failure') lies not in their ability to write stageworthy drama, not in conception, or execution, but in reaching down to the actual dramatic level of their time, in submitting to the vulgar taste of the audience for whose pleasure, both the actors and the management of the theatre blindly followed a path dangerous and harmful to the interest of their national drama. The Romantics were unwilling to give what the audience might have received with pleasure. Several letters of Byron and his Journals, for example, testify to this fact. Speaking about the Venetian dramas and Sardanapalus of Byron, E.M. Butler very rightly says, "Any producer with his salt could prove


that, if slightly shortened, they are perfectly fitted for
the stage." John Drinkwater also finds, that "these plays,
properly presented, would handsomely survive the test of the
stage." They have survived the test in the later period,
when the dramatic taste and theatrical conditions improved.
It can be said now with justification, that where the
Romantics failed to render stageworthiness to their plays,
they, in most cases, failed consciously. For we never find
from the records, that Shelley wished theatrical success of
Prometheus Unbound, or Hellas, or Swellfoot; he did not write
them for the stage. Byron never wished it at all, and so
also was the case with Scott.

The point that is overlooked is that, the Romantic
poets of England were capable, in general, of writing
stage-plays, and that they could have succeeded on the
contemporary London stage, had they seriously wished it. In
that case, what was mostly required to do on their part was
to surrender their ego, give up their idea of bringing about
dramatic reform, abandon all thoughts of higher artistic
mission, and to aim at nothing but the stage-success. That
was not possible. For their superior poetic status and
refined tone and taste, their self-conscious position as the
major artists of their age, or in other words, their sense of
artistic responsibility and superiority could not permit them
to give what, though pleasing to the contemporary theatrical
public, was not, according to them, good literature. Their


85 Drinkwater, John, The Pilgrim of Eternity: Byron -
inner urge was, not to produce anything of ephemeral kind (as the successful plays of the period are), but to write something of worth and enduring value. And it was really very difficult to achieve both - to please the audience and to aim at a higher goal at the same time. The peculiarity of the period in which they were the major authors was that a dramatist had to aim at either of the two; the theatrically successful playwrights of the time aimed at the former, while the Romantics aimed at the latter. Chew's remark in this context is enlightening.

"Throughout the period," writes Samuel Chew, "those plays which were most successful on the stage are historically of least importance. They were purely ephemeral." Chew's remark ultimately leads one to the same conclusion, and also conversely to the view, that the theatrical success, or failure in a given theatrical condition alone cannot determine the ultimate success or failure of a dramatist. Besides, as there cannot be any absolute standard of judgment, so also a corrupt system can hardly appreciate a thing that struggles hard to remain above corruption. This argument may reasonably apply to the question under discussion, and help us to look with unprejudiced eye at the centre of the problem.

This is not to suggest, however, that the plays of the Romantics which are stageable, could have been popular,

86Chew, op. cit. p.25.
or successful on the early nineteenth-century English stage, if properly represented, nor do we suggest that they are entirely faultless. The first cannot be expected for the reason given earlier. As regards the second, it is to be admitted that the Romantics' plays have some faults, both technical and sometimes conceptual; but these artistic lapses on the whole, are not so extra-ordinarily great or serious, as to render the pieces quite puerile. Some artistic faults are discernible even in the plays of Shakespeare's early period; Bernard Shaw is also not free from them. It is, therefore, not surprising that these dramatists falling in between these two great playwrights - Shakespeare and Shaw, will have some artistic short-comings. At the age of about twenty-five Wordsworth wrote his tragedy and Coleridge completed his Robespierre and Osorio; Shelley wrote his The Cenci and the Charles I fragment, and Scott wrote some of his plays round about the same age; Keats wrote his Otho and the fragments - King Stephen and Gripus even at an earlier age, and Byron completed all his plays before he was thirty-five. How many fine dramas of Shakespeare or Shaw, indicative of Shakespearean genius, or Shavian dramatic calibre were written at the age at which the Romantics wrote their dramatic works? Perhaps, only a few. The maturity of life and experience is also a thing which cannot be overlooked in this connection, and the world is unfortunate not to have been able to see the dramas of these poets' real maturity, before which Death had snatched
away most of the promising buds of the Romantic Age.

Different critics and scholars, while pointing out the Romantics' failure as dramatists, hold different views: Nicoll seems to have stressed their inner failings, though he has also taken into account the conditions external to these poets.®7 T.S. Eliot thinks, that the Romantics' failure was not in their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language.®

"I was persuaded," says Eliot, "that the failure of the nineteenth century poets when they wrote for the theatre (and most of the greatest English poets had tried their hand at drama) was not in their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language; and that this was due largely to their limitation to a strict blank verse which, after extensive use for non-dramatic poetry, had lost the flexibility which blank verse must have if it is to give the effect of conversation."®®

But it is difficult to agree in detail with Eliot, as a study of the plays of these poets displays some technical, and sometimes, some conceptual defects mainly due to their immaturity, and in most cases, to their ignorance of stage-tactics. Eliot has given undue and exclusive stress on their employment of blank verse. It is, as a matter of fact, one of the defects, but not the only defect, as he seems to think.

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®7Nicoll, Allardyce, op. cit. pp.58-78.

It stands partly in their way of achieving easy communicability with the readers and audience; their due attention to this point would have certainly helped them to come closer to the mind of their audience. The Romantic poets, perhaps, thought the medium of dramatic dialogue not so important as Eliot has thought. Wordsworth, for example, while advocating the use of the familiar language of men in poetry, feels no necessity to extend his theory of Poetic diction to dramatic composition.

"It is not, then, in the dramatic parts of composition," he says, "that we look for this distinction of language."®

Shelley and Byron, of course, gave some attention to the problem.

"I entirely agree with those modern critics", says Shelley, "who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men, and that our great ancestors, the ancient English poets are the writers, a study of whom might incite us to do that for our own age which they have done for theirs. But it must be the real language of men in general and not that of any particular class to whose society the writer happens to belong. So much for what I have attempted."®

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®Shelley, Preface to The Cenci, in Shelley's Works, p.278.
Lord Byron's object in this respect was somewhat similar. In a letter to his publisher and friend - Murray, dated July 14, 1821, he writes in connection with his play - 

*Sardanapalus -

"It has been my object to be as simple and severe as Alfieri, and I have broken down the poetry as nearly as I could to common language."^91

Whether, or not Byron has been able to do what he wanted (we think, he and Shelley are mostly successful), he and Shelley have felt its necessity at least. Wordsworth feels no need for this at all, and his theory of Poetic diction, though greatly unsuccessful in practice, is strictly limited to poetic composition only. Other poets have not thought about it at all.

Fine poetry was a passion for the Romantics in general. The style and dramatic poetry of the Elizabethans, especially Shakespeare received their constant admiration. And it was not very unlikely, that the Romantic poets, urged by the desire to write as fine poetry as Shakespeare wrote, have employed blank verse and imitated, on occasions, his style. Even Byron, who was convinced, that the "old dramatists" (the Elizabethans) are "full of gross faults," had to admit "the beauty of their language."^92 This proves that Byron is fascinated by the verbal beauty of the Elizabethans. And where there is fascination, there is

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possibility of imitation conscious or unconscious; and when the passion for it is on, the question of its adaptability to their own time is automatically not very important to them - it is not at least a primary question.'

Samuel Chew traces the cause of the Romantics' dramatic defects mostly in their "lack of experience in stage-craft and of knowledge of technique." 93

"The writers of the Romantic drama," he says, "were amateurs. Hence their enthusiasm for new theories. Hence their openness to influences. Hence the frequently faultly construction of their plays." 94

He even applies his notion to Byron also. But the plenty of records are available to prove that Lord Byron was not an amateur in the way as his contemporary brethren were. G. Wilson Knight's comment also supports the view, 95

"As amateur actor, play-goer and member of the Drury Lane Committee," Knight says, "Byron was thoroughly apprenticed to the theatre;" 95

But when we find in Byron some dramatic faults mostly common to other Romantics, we find it hard to agree with Chew in detail. As a matter of fact, the cause of dramatic faults of Byron lies not in his "lack of experience in stage-craft and of knowledge of technique," but in a more general way, 96

93 Chew, op. cit. p. 30.
94 Ibid.
in his romantic temperament, which is common to all the Romantics. Chew seems to have ignored it. Given due importance to it, almost all the dramatic faults of these poets can be accounted for. Because of this romantic temperament, we find the Romantics unduly stressing sentiments and passions, rather than plot in drama. Their stress on the invisible psychological actions of the hero, in other words, on passions and sentiments, makes these poet-dramatists somewhat indifferent to the development of visible actions of the plot. This is one of the defects of the dramas of the Romantics. In this respect, there is basically not much difference between Joanna Baillie's "Plays on the Passions," and the plays of these major Romantic poets. Their own peculiar temperament and mental attitude, perhaps, directed them to it, and we believe, no amount of training and outward experience could have held this inward tendency in check. For the force of nurture cannot fully dominate the that of nature.

Another defect of their dramas is that, the authors, in order to dramatise some sentiment, or passion, have given all attention to their heroes, and as such, the subordinate characters have become most often shadowy and insignificant. The Romantics' frequent preference for metaphysical theme and historical subject of the distant past constitutes another defect of these plays; their dramatic plots often seem to have been chosen to explain in dramatic terms their ideas and thesis. These defects, among others, if
analysed, can be traced to their source which is their romantic personality and temperament. Experience and training could help them to improve their constructional skill, but could not have possibly changed their nature and temperament. An example may be cited to clarify the point. Lord Byron's study and interest in the Classical School of poetry of Dryden and Alexander Pope could not change his essentially romantic nature. His satires, his occasional use of rhymed couplet, his apparent lack of sympathy for the poetic theories and practices of his fellow Romantic poets, and his likings for the classical regularity, simplicity and clarity, and above all, his lack of declared views on the supremacy of imagination in poetry, have persuaded the critics to look upon Lord Byron as a Romantic paradox, having more kinship with the Augustan England. But what is actually true, is that, Lord Byron, inspite of all these confusing symptoms of neo-classical mind has remained at bottom a man endowed with romantic temperament. The former traits are acquired, while the latter is inherent in his very nature. How can we take the author of Childe Harold, Lara, Don Juan, Manfred, The Deformed Transformed, Cain, to name only a few, as an author of neo-classical mind? In form sometimes, Byron shares the heritage of the Neo-Classical School, but in sentiment and attitude he is undoubtedly a Romantic poet. And we are persuaded to believe that, despite his attempts at following the classical rules of regularity, and unity, despite his preference for the style of simplicity
and severity in drama, Lord Byron is again essentially as Romantic a dramatist, as he is as a poet. His romantic poetic vision unmistakably sustains his dramas; it is his romantic mind that seeks self-expression and stresses sentiment, emotion and passion, much in the same way as it sustains the dramas of the other Romantic poets. It goes to prove the supremacy of nature over the nurture in general.

The plays of the Romantics do not fall into the category of the main body of their artistic creation. This view is applicable, more or less, to all the Romantic poets of the age. One may be tempted to exclude Lord Byron from the group in this regard, but what is more correct is that, despite his Lordship's enthusiasm for dramatic reform, and systematic approach to the problem, Byron is to be taken as a poet, before he is accepted as a dramatist. Of course, there is no denying the fact, that his dramatic works are not the by-product of his genius in the same sense in which the dramatic works of other Romantic poets are.

The Romantics were not unconscious about the worth of their plays. They were sometimes self-critical too. When The Borderers was rejected, William Wordsworth, it seems, realized where lay the reason for rejection, and wrote to his friend - J. Tobin,

"If ever I attempt another drama, it shall be written either purposely for the closet, or purposely for the stage. There is no middle way." 96

Wordsworth seems to have been alive to the fact, that there was existing in his time, an unbridgeable gulf between a literary drama and a stage-drama, and his Borderers stands mid-way between the two. Of all the Romantics, Byron was fully conscious of what he was doing as a dramatist; he was equally conscious of the intrinsic worth of his plays. Byron perfectly knew that the actual worth of his plays could not be realized by the then theatrical public, and that it would be a sheer folly on his part to present his plays on the stage, until proper cultivation of taste was effected, and power of appreciating a fine drama developed.

After all, it must be admitted that the living theatre of the early nineteenth century was not profited by the creative energies of the Age's major poets. The theatre of the early nineteenth century moved in its own way, and these poets moved in their own, and there happened to be no actual meeting of the two. As a result, neither the theatre of the time practically gained from them, nor did these poets, in general, gain from the practical world of the theatre. But despite this undesirable cleavage, it is to be admitted that the plays of the major Romantic poets are not negligible; some of them bear signature of some promising talents, not to be found very easily. It was unfortunate that a strong time-spirit conspired against these dramatists. They were not unequal to the task of writing drama, but their capacities were circumscribed by different forces within and without them. The Romantics' achievements in poetry is so outstanding, that
the minds of the critics have more been drawn towards it; and as a result, their dramatic works have received remarkably less attention than they actually deserve. We have tried, as far as possible, to examine the dramatic works of the Romantic poets on their own ground, and to define their positive as well negative aspects as drama.