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A Study on Shelley's Myth Making Art in the Poems *Alastor* and *Queen Mab*

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Abstract*:* The purpose of present paper is to deal with myth making art in Shelley's poem's Alastor and Queen Mab. In the Introduction to C.D. Locock's edition of Shelley's Poems[1] A. Clutton-Brook begins his assessment of Shelley's poetry with a censure. Disapproving the merit of Shelley's early works, he observes: Shelley has often been praised as a poet rather for what he attempted than for what he accomplished. He was, perhaps, the most ambitious of all our great poets; especially in his earlier years, when he had little understood of the nature of his own powers or even of the proper functions of poetry. Then he regarded poetry as a kind of maid-of-all-work to be set to any task that his enthusiasms might suggest.[2]

Keywords: Myth, Maid-of-all, Enthusiasms, mythicize, philosophical thoughts, appreciation.

1. Introduction: The important question, however, is not whether Shelley has been praised more for what he attempted than for what he accomplished but whether his attempts deserve to be praised at all? During the first five years of his poetic career Shelley was, indeed, extremely ambitious and to some extent, it is true, he misunderstood his own poetic powers. Is it then, for this reason alone, simply futile to praise his early attempts (as Clutton-Brock seems to be suggesting)?

Shelley, during the early years of his poetic career, wanted to devote his poetic energy to the cause of political and social reforms. He was perhaps wrong in regarding poetry as a handmaid of the contemporary politics. Nevertheless, even his earliest attempts reveal that he was constantly trying to achieve a new poetic medium of expression. Though still a novice, he was attempting to explore new possibilities for his future. There is, indeed, much in the early attempts which, it seems (in spite of Clutton-Brock's complaints), has never been fully and adequately appreciated.[3] During the first five years of his poetic career (1812-1817) he seems to be moving in all directions, seeking for the genre which would best suit his mind and ideals. In ***Alastor***, for example, he tried to interpret Nature symbolically in terms of human life and in ***The Revolt,*** he attempted to present an eternal human situation in terms of the supernatural. To quote Baker,

The first five years of Shelley's life as a maturing poet were devoted to the exploration and establishment of themes, ideas, images, and symbols which he was to engage with greater success in the last half of his single decade of 'granted power'. This was also the period when he was searching, with

a bewildering eclecticism, for an ethic and metaphysic which would be satisfying to his idealistic cast of minds and suitable for poetic exploitation. As Shelley's questing and questioning mind gradually emerged from the pseudo-gothic, pseudo- materialistic background in which it was nurtured, he began slowly to discover the modes in which he was to write and the principles by which he was to live.[4]

Analysis of Previous Work Done: This questing and questioning was not for nothing. In fact, it was during these five years of explorations and experiments that Shelley was gradually emerging as a poet and as a mythmaker. ***The Revolt of Islam*** is perhaps the first major work of Shelley in which he uses his mythmaking faculty. In fact, here he does create his own patch-***work myth***[5] ***in*** terms of his radical philosophy.

However, mythmaking, as we said in the previous chapter, is essentially a technique in which the imagination works in such a manner that the phenomenal world appears as one spiritual whole and the poet is able to create some such cosmic patterns out of his perceptions and experiences which seems to be representing the whole range of man's spiritual consciousness. One can see in Shelley's poetry the working of this kind of imagination even before ***The Revolt***. Its full operation, however, is often curbed by his not-yet- mature poetics, and his doctrinal interests scarcely allow him to go far enough. Nevertheless, its working can be clearly felt at least from ***Alastor*** onwards. To begin our present study from ***Alastor***, therefore, is justifiable, not because ***Alastor*** and ***Mont Blanc*** and the ***Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*** are, to any recognizable degree, myths, but because they reveal the early possibilities of the future mythmaker. It is from this point of view that their interpretation is presented here.

In the following sections emphasis is laid mainly on three aspects of Shelley's poetry before ***Prometheus Unbound***, first, the working of his imagination in the direction of mythmaking, second, his treatment of Nature which, even at this stage, seems characteristic of his later myths; and third, the evolution of the semi-philosophical content which later sustains his mythic patterns. A brief survey of ***Alastor***, ***Mont Balnc***, ***Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*** and ***The Revolt of Islam***, therefore, seems rather necessary. An attempt has also been made, though only marginally, to show that, in spite of Clutton-Brocks' views quoted earlier, these early attempts, though remarkable in many ways, have not been fully appreciated – not even as early experimental attempts[6] and that these experiments require to be understood more sympathetically.

Queen Mab[7] is Shelly's first major attempt to clothe his early ideas, ethical, moral, social, political, and metaphysical, in the form of an epical poem. In spite of its advocates, like Bernard Shaw,[8] it is clearly an unsuccessful attempt to unify contradictory ideas in a mode in which Shelley was not at home. As Mrs. Campbell says, in "this strange setting of mincing eighteenth century verse mixed with revolutionary war-cries, Shelley's feelings are as utterly obscured as his imagination"[9]. It is a distempered vision of an immature propagandist rather than a work of art. It is useful to understand it in attempting to trace the development of Shelley's thought from his early days to his mature years, but as a poem and as a work of art it hardly deserves much attention. Shelley's belief in an omniscient power embodied in ***Queen Mab*** herself, his vision of the past, present, and future as revealed by the Queen in the presence of Ianthe's soul, and his personification of the temporal power and religious tyranny in the form of Ahasuerus and the Iberian priest – nothing can invest his poem of some 2300 lines with any degree of interest. His ideas, though forcefully expressed, do not please the imagination. Such lines as quoted by Douglas Bush, do not show my promises for the future mythmaking. As Bush says, "No one could predict ***Prometheus Unbound*** from Shelley's

interpretation"[10].

Shelley's second work of some length is ***Alastor***[11] in which the real poet is born, though still not quite unfettered by the eighteenth-century allegorical tradition. It is indeed a great change from ***Queen Mab***, not merely for its melody and masterly blank verse, but also for its energy, even grandeur. As Hughes rightly says, "It is the first of the poems in which Shelley puts his social theme aside for things that were nearer to himself."[12]

Alastor is a controversial poem. What Shelley says in his preface is contradicted by what he suggests in the poem. If one interprets the poem in the light of the preface, one is sure to misread it. The real difficulty arises, however, not from the poem but from the preface. The young hero of Shelley is not the same person both in the preface and the poem. As Campbell put it,

3, **Results and Discussions:** In the preface the youth is condemned: in the poem he is glorified"[13]. The poet of ***Alastor***, says Shelley in the preface, "seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave". Thus, he further says, "The poet's self-centered seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin". From this Shelley draws the moral that "Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt". And Shelley adds the final warning by observing that "Those who love not their fellow beings, live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave"[14].

His hero, the young Poet, Shelley tells us in the poem, was 'Gentle, and brave, and generous' whose infancy was nurtured by 'solemn visions, and bright silver dream'. He left his 'alienated home' in search of 'strange truths in undiscovered lands'. He visited the 'awful ruins of the days old' and always gazed on mysterious things

Suddenly the vision assumed the form of a beautiful fleshly woman and the heart of the poet 'sickened with excess/of love'. He spread his arms to embrace the woman but the whole vision soon disappeared.

The dark night 'Involved and swallowed up the vision'. The poet became extremely restless and 'wildly he wandered on, /Day after day'. At length he paused on the Chorasmian shore where he saw a little shallop floating nearby and his voyage down the river occupies much space. Here the poet has an opportunity to describe Nature in a manner which exposes new levels of appreciation. At length the poet left his boat and passing through a forest reached near a precipice. That was the end of his journey as well as of his life. As the whole search was in vain, the poet died. His last sight:

"Was the great moon, which over the western line, Of the wide world her mighty
horn suspended, with whose dun beams inwoven darkness seemed

Thus, the conclusion lifts the local scene to the level of the universal." 16
Alastor, says Havens, "is not a unity; it does not produce a single impression; it was not the offspring of a single, dominating purpose". He thinks that the author of this poem was confused much in the same way as the reader is confused. The hero's quest is purposeless. However, "It may be that Shelley had some idea in mind but failed to work it out"[16]. Hoffman finds Havens wrong and suggests:

We must not abandon the attempt to discover minute connections between it and the Preface for the Preface makes us aware that a meaning was intended.[17]

However, the real issue is not what Shelley intended to do but the central impression that the poem makes in the mind of the reader. The title was suggested to Shelley by Peacock, as Peacock himself says, because the poem "treated the 'Spirit of Solitude' as a spirit of evil"[18]. However, in the poem the spirit of solitude is definitely not treated as ***a spirit of evil***. The poet conveys a sense of vacancy and emptiness[19], but it has not been mentioned anywhere in the poem, not even by any indirect reference, that the spirit of solitude is akin to an evil genius. As both Baker and Havens agree, ***Alastor*** is a ***Quest-poem*** in which Shelley represents his hero's (or probably his own) search for the ideal and the beautiful. Whatever the contradictions in the poem, the central meaning is clear: the quest of Love. ***Alastor*** is first of the poems in which he develop his theory of love as an all- pervasive power. In this respect at least ***Alastor*** is nearest to his 1821 poem, "Epispsychildian

Alastor was a key poem in Shelley's development as philosophical and psychological poet. For it was the first of the major poems to undertake an experiment with what may be called the psyche-epipsyche strategy, of which he was to make considerable use in the central story of ***The Revolt of Islam***, which was to become one of the major interrelated themes in his first great poem, ***Prometheus Unbound***, and which was to be used at the highest possible level in ***Epispsychildian***, ***Adonais***, and ***The Triumph of Life***.

To put the matter in Shelleyan terms, the mind (psyche) imaginatively creates or envisions what it does not have (epipsyche), and then seeks to possess epipsyche, to move towards it as a goal. Therefore, the psyche-epipsyche strategy in a nutshell is the evolution by the mind of an ideal pattern towards which it then aspires.[20] If one tries to understand ***Alastor*** in the light of Baker's interpretation, it does not appear to be "a rather dull and confusing poem which will not bear much reading"[21]. This poem is the first of the series in which the Shelleyan conflict assumes the character of a quest. And, if ***Alastor*** is a quest-poem, as it certainly is, we need not believe that the spirit of solitude in the poem is represented as an evil genius. In spite of its title, it is presumably not a poem having a revenge motive.[22]

However, ***Alastor*** has yet another aspect. A study of the poet's imagery, his attitude to Nature, his visionary poetics, his quasi- philosophical premises, above all his imagination – all point to one direction: Shelley's unconscious deflection from the crude philosophical Necessitarianism of ***Queen Mab*** and an attempt to create a visionary world of his own. The ***veiled maiden***, for example, is Shelley's first attempt to mythicise the spiritual mystery of Love. The vision is not yet mature and its flashily attributes make it rather too earthly and realistic, but it is undoubtedly the first recognizable embodiment of the idea of Intellectual Beauty. If the poet fails to reach the goal, as he obviously does, it is not because the vision is an illusion but because he is not yet mature enough to bear its radiance. It is wrong to feel that the ***veiled maiden*** is 'La belle dame sans merci', the dreadful illusion to which the generous soul of the poet is scarified.

Works Cited and Consulted

1. C.D. Locock, ed., ***The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley***, Vol. I, (Methuen, London, 1911).

2. Ibid., Introduction, p.v.

3. The proof of this fact is that some such poems of Shelley as ***Mont Blanc*** are usually neglected even by those critics who claim that their studies are complete and exhaustive.
4. ***Shelley's Major Poetry*** (Russell & Russell, N. York, 1961), p. 5.
5. R.A. Foakes, ***The RomanticAssertion***, (Methuen, Lond., 1958),

p. 9.

6. They have always seen used to prove that Shelley was a disciple of Godwin, Holbach, Hume, or Berkeley, but never to prove that Shelley was preparing to be what he later became, a mythmaker.
7. Written 1812-13 and published 1813.
8. Shaw called it a ***perfectly original poem on a great subject***. Quoted by Baker in ***Shelley's major Poetry,*** p. 38.
9. Campbell, ***Shelley and the Unromantics***, (Methuen, 1924), p.114.
10. D. Bush, ***Mythology and the Romantic Tradition***, pp. 133-34.
11. Written and published 1815.
12. A.M.D. Hughes, ***Alastor***, Or ***The Spirit of Solitude***, in Modern Language Review, Vol. 43, (1948), p. 30.
13. ***Shelley and the Unromantics***, p. 188.
14. Hutchinson, ed. ***The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley's***, (O.U.P., Lond., 1956) pp. 14, 15.
15. As King-Hele remarks, ***as a rule, the soul's shining core is, as Shelley pute it veiled***, ***Shelley: His Thought and Work***, (Macmillan, N. York, 1960), p. 57.
16. Campbell is not pleased with the fleshly woman. The woman, she says, "who should have been but a symbol of the soul's desire steps out of the land of imagery like some scantily dressed beauty of a society ball". ***Shelley and the Unromantics***, (Methuen, Lond., 1924), p. 190.
17. 'Nature's vast frame' is an important aspect of Shelley's later myths.
18. R.D. Havens, ***Shelley's 'Alastor*** in PMLA, Vol. XLV (1930),

pp. 1103, 1108, 1109.

19. H.L. Hoffman, ***An Odyssey of the Soul: Shelley's Alastor***, (Columbis Univ. Prese, N. York, 1933)., p. 3.
20. Quoted by Locock, ed., p. 537.
21. ***Alastor***, says J.L. De Palacio, "is the poem of a void and vacant world; its poetry is the poetry of emptiness in which no voice is heard but a dim reverberation when Nature is bandying echoes with the mountains and rocks". ***Music and Musical Themes in Shelley's Poetry***, in MLR, Vol. 59, (1964), p. 346.
22. ***Shelley's Major Poetry***, p. 53.
23. Milton Wilson, ***Shelley's Later Poetry***, (Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), p. 8.
24. Most of the critics believe that ***Alastor*** is partially autobiography. Some have based their interpretation on the condition of Shelley's mind in 1815. Shelley's growing interest in Wordsworth and Coleridge is a much-discussed subject. Paul Mueschke and Lealie Griggs, for example, find Wordsworth as the prototype of the Poet in ***Alastor***. "Wordsworth as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley's ***Alastor***, PMLA, XXIX (1934), pp. 229-45. Joseph. Ralen considers, not Wordsworth, but Coleridge as the prototype of Shelley's Poet. ***Alastor*** should be read, he says, "as an allegorical

narrative of Coleridge's fate". He seems to be thinking that Shelley was trying to see himself in the image of Coleridge. "Coleridge as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley' ***Alastor***, RES, Vol. 17, Number 67 (August, 1966), pp. 278-292.

25. **Shelley: *His Thought and Work***, p. 60.

26. ***Shelley and the Unromantics***, p. 191.

27. Wilson Knight, ***The Starlit Deme***, (O.U.P., 1943), p. 187.

28. ***Shelley and the Unromantics***, p.190.

29. Symonds says that ***Alastor*** has a ***vein of unhealthy sentiment***, ***Shelley***, (E.M.L., 1887), p. 86.

30. The volume was entitled ***Alastor*** : ***or The Spirit of Solitude and other Poems*** which included, besides ***Alastor***, eleven other poems of which the most famous are ***To Wordsworth***, ***The moon is dark….*** and the poem influenced by Gray's elegy called ***A Summer Evening Churchyard***.

31. Letter to Robert Southey dated March 7, 1816. Ingpen, ed. ***The Letters of Percy Byssha Shelley***, (G. Bell, Lond., 1914), Vol. I, p. 471.

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