THE EVOLUTION OF THE ROMANTIC DRAMA
IN THE PLAYS OF ALEXANDRE DUMAS
AND VICTOR HUGO

IN 1829, Lady Morgan, who, for a time, was taken very
seriously by the French and hailed as one of the Ro-
mantic Muses, came to Paris. Having expressed a desire
to see one of the plays of her old enemy Racine, she was
very much surprised on hearing one of her young romantic
admirers exclaim: "Go to the Théâtre Français! sit out a
tragedy of Racine! You are joking, you do not mean it". Lady Morgan, having asked her interlocutor if he belonged
to the same "heresy" as herself and if he happened to be
one of the few Anti-Classicists, the latter replied, "You have
with you the whole of France, with a few exceptions. No-
body goes to the Théâtre Français now when Racine is
played, or the few who go do so to testify their disappro-
bation by hissing." Dreading a mystification, Lady Morgan
went on, "but if Racine is out of fashion what tragedies does
Mlle. Mars play? Voltaire's?" "Voltaire, pooh, he is
a dethroned monarch. When you were in France, Corneille,
Racine, Voltaire were still tolerated, were they not?"
"Tolerated! I should think so." "Well, we have changed
all that. We still read these authors as we do Euripides
and Aeschylus, but we no longer go and see them acted,
or rather declaimed or chanted, as if by church choristers."
"Then what do you go and see?" "Our Great Historical
Dramas, written not in pompous Alexandrines, but in prose,
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The style of truth, the language of life and nature, and composed boldly, in defiance of Aristotle and Boileau. Their plot may run to any number of acts, and the time cover any number of nights, months or years, or if the author please, he may take in a century; then for place, the first scene may be laid in Paris, the last in Kamchatka. In short France has regained her literary freedom and makes full use of it.

That the Romanticists had won or were fighting for their literary freedom is unquestionable, and it is perfectly obvious also that some were making full use of it, when one of them, M. Albert de S... wrote his Creation, "an historical and romantic drama in six acts, allowing a thousand years to each act". The representation of each act was to take one evening, and the six acts were to be distributed among the six best Parisian theatres. We can also understand the uneasiness and the restlessness of the Classicists. Seven well-known authors presented a petition to the King of France asking him to use his authority to protect the French drama from the contamination of the new theories. Charles X smiled, and for once acting wisely, declined the invitation and merely replied: "Gentlemen, like every other Frenchman, I only have my seat in the pit".

The quarrel in fact was not merely an academic one, for the authors or prospective authors were supported by a strong group of adherents young, ardent, scornful of the past. Both the authors and their admirers were dazzled by the possibilities of the future, but unfortunately bound together by a common creed purely negative in character. As Dumas had it, "We knew what we no longer wanted, but we did not yet know what we wanted".

What they no longer wanted was the classical drama, but no one could positively define or truly conceive a real,
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living and "actable" romantic drama. Victor Hugo, two years before, in 1827, had written a famous romantic drama, *Cromwell*. No one could deny its richness; it contained a remarkable blending of elements, tragedy, comedy, history. It showed a magnificent disregard for the classical unities. It had only one shortcoming, which is no slight one in a drama. It could not be acted. No stage manager could ever have brought together the number of actors needed and the setting required, and no audience could ever have been able to sit through the play. Victor Hugo had to be contented with writing his famous preface, which as a romantic manifesto soon became more famous than the play itself. He then returned to his novels and poetry, two fields in which he had already met with success, when, on the eleventh of February, 1827, the play of an author who had been rather indifferent to the quarrel between the Classicists and Romanticists was acted at the Théâtre Français and met with a tremendous success.

Dumas had already had one of his plays accepted by the Théâtre Français, but the play was delayed and was to be given later, so that his first great success as a dramatist was his *Henry III*. A sort of legend for which he is partly responsible has been given credence about Dumas. It is often asserted that Dumas, a mere secretary at the Duke of Orleans', hard pressed for money, and worried about his mother then ill and in poor circumstances, had taken to writing in order to help her, and that one day he awoke to find himself famous as a dramatist. It is also said that after seeing the English actors who came to Paris in 1827, Macready, Kemble, and especially Kean, who became the hero of one of his dramas, Dumas was so profoundly impressed that he experienced an irrepressible desire to write plays of his own. "I recognized finally", said Dumas in one
of his fits of enthusiasm for Shakespeare, "that he was the man who had most created after God. From that moment my vocation was decided upon, I felt that the special mission to which each man is called was being offered to me." The truth is slightly less romantic. The real mission of Dumas was to open a factory from which popular novels were brought out wholesale. On the other hand, on coming to Paris in 1822, he had already spent seven years reading and studying dramatists, and trying his hand; and, by 1829, had actually written several plays, one of which had been presented by a second-rate theatre as early as 1825.

Dumas' first play, *Christine*, is interesting in many respects but not as the outcome of a sudden burst of dramatic genius in a writer without experience or contact with other dramatists in his own country or abroad. Dumas' play is what he calls "a trilogy in five acts with prologue and epilogue". It is essentially an anti-classical drama in which Dumas seems to take pleasure in defying the Classicists. The subtitle of the play, *Stockholm, Fontainebleau, Rome*, is in itself a protest against the Aristotelian rules. The incidents contained in the play cover a period of more than twenty years. It is a historical picture, vivid, animated, and with highly romantic situations which remind us of the most tragic scenes in the plays of Shakespeare. The whole drama centres around the romantic figure of Christine, the famous queen of Sweden, who fell in love with one of her courtiers, an Italian adventurer, Monaldeschi, whom she finally had murdered. Monaldeschi, a type of melodrama villain, is in love, not with the queen, but with her crown. Christine, thinking that his hesitations come from the difference in their rank, gives up her crown. But he then refuses to marry her. She goes to France accompanied by Monaldeschi and a few followers. There they meet the great writers of
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the seventeenth century, introduced into the drama in truly romantic fashion, and they discuss with the queen questions of literature. Such details are characteristic of the method of Dumas and Victor Hugo in their earliest romantic dramas. They endeavor to bring into their plays all sorts of elements of interest to their spectators, but which a classical dramatist, intent only on following the development of a passion, would carefully leave out.

Monaldeschi keeps plotting against the queen, who would like to recover her crown. Finally, his intrigues are discovered, and he is put to death. Christine then goes to Rome, lives there for many years and dies in Italy. The whole play reads like a novel of Dumas, with plenty of action and with some very dramatic situations and well-drawn characters. His two best creations are the Italian adventurer, and his wife; for, as a true melodrama villain, Monaldeschi was already married to a certain Paula, who follows him disguised throughout his peregrinations and adventures, and whose intense love, devotion, and later hatred provide some of the best episodes in the play.

Henri III, which Dumas wrote after Christine, is better conceived and more limited in point of time and place. It also is a historical drama, but the melodramatic element in it is not so pronounced as in Christine. The play is due to Dumas’ chance reading of a short account of the death of a certain Count Saint Mégrin, a courtier of Henry III. The period was an interesting one; the reign of the weak and criminal Henry III, dominated by his mother, the scheming Catherine de Medici, and threatened by the independence and the ambition of his subject, the Duke de Guise. The episode of the so-called poisoning of the Duchess de Guise and the murder of Saint Mégrin added to the picture the lurid touch which the imagination of Dumas
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relished. In *Henri III* we have a strange combination of Dumas, Shakespeare, Schiller, and Walter Scott. From Shakespeare, Dumas has borrowed the habit of introducing into his plays meditations on human life, on love, ambition and other already exploited topics. His debt to Walter Scott is far greater. In a recent study he was taken to task for bringing into his plays too many details, including the follies and fashions of the days he is describing. It has been said that his history is trivial, gossipy, the sort that is recounted of the great by valets and chambermaids. All this is unquestionably true, but these flaws had already been found in the novels of Walter Scott. The public was trained to accept that kind of history. Dumas, more than any of our Romantic dramatists, knew what the public wanted. The secret of his popularity lies partly in his being always ready to cater to the demands of his contemporaries, and also in the fact that he preserves some of the traits of a novelist in his dramas and remains partly a dramatist in his novels. His *Henri III* was far better than the first romantic drama of Victor Hugo, *Cromwell*, and infinitely superior to the average historical and romantic drama. Victor Hugo, no doubt encouraged by the success of Dumas, returned to the drama. Hugo was not always original, far from it, but he had a remarkable faculty of adaptation and a unique command of language. He generally spent a good deal of time feeling his way, but once he had discovered the prevalent mood of the day, he went further on his path than most of his contemporaries.

*Henri III* was acted on February 11th, 1829; by the 24th of June Victor Hugo had completed his *Marion Delorme*. He had worked very quietly, contrary to his habit, not knowing apparently if he could produce a play that could be acted. His very friends entertained doubts
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as to his capacities as a dramatist. His great concern was to be original. Shakespeare, as he had already realized, is not susceptible of imitation, but two other English writers, Walter Scott and Byron, were tremendously popular in France at the time. He wanted particularly to avoid imitating Scott whose influence could the more easily be detected. He escaped Scott, more or less, but he came under the spell of Byron. In Marion Delorme, Victor Hugo takes his subject, not from classical antiquity, of course, but from the history of France. The central figures of the drama, as may well be imagined, are neither kings nor queens nor princes. The heroine is a woman whose life has been anything but virtuous, and who has conceived the purest and most platonic kind of love for a young mysterious hero, Didier, who knows nothing of her past. For Didier, Marion is merely the beautiful and pure Marie who lives a quiet and retired life far from the Court. Didier, himself, is an outcast, proud, mysterious, fatal, like a regular Byronic hero. He has no family, no name but his Christian name, Didier. The play carries us about a good deal as a regular romantic drama should. It opens at Blois, then takes us to an old chateau some distance from Blois, then to Chambord, the residence of the King; and ends on the scaffold on which Didier is put to death. It has some beautiful scenes and very dramatic situations: as when, for instance, Didier discovers the identity of Marion and refuses to be saved by her.

Encouraged by the acceptation of his play at the Théâtre Français, irritated by the delays and the difficulties raised by the censor, Victor Hugo set to work again. On August 29th, of the same year, he began a new play, Hernani, which was completed by the first of October. The background chosen by Victor Hugo in the case of Hernani was a
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particularly felicitous one. As a child he had visited Spain, and not long before beginning the play he had conjured up in his mind visions of this "land of voluptuousness, love and death", as it is described by Maurice Barrès. Moreover, Spain was remarkably fitted to serve as the background of a highly colored, picturesque and romantic drama by a great poet. The hero of the drama, again, though of noble origin, is an outcast, a bandit living in the mountains whence he comes every evening to see Doña Sol, the young niece of an old grandee of Spain, Don Ruy Gomès, who wants to marry her. To complete the picture, the King of Spain himself, Don Carlos, is in love with Doña Sol, or, as one of the characters of Hugo sums up the play:

Three gallants, one a bandit, his head due to the scaffold,
Then a duke, a King, adoring the same woman;
The siege is laid, the onset made. Who won? The bandit.
Nothing strange in that!

at least for a Romanticist.

The characters in Hernani are all highly romantic types, with strong passions, love, ambition, thirst for revenge, always ready for action and yet fond of philosophical meditations. There is something distinctly Byronic in the character of Hernani, a hero who in his own words: "brings misery to all those who approach him"; "a force that cannot be resisted", "a soul of misery, made of gloom". Fortunately his Byronism is relieved to a certain extent by the very beautiful poetry in which it is expressed, and by the devotion of Doña Sol. When Hernani has asked Doña Sol to choose between the Duke and himself, when he has asked her if she will be able to follow him among his "rough companions",

Men all proscribed and whose names the hangman knows,
Men whose blades nor hearts ever relent;

Men all proscribed and whose names the hangman knows,
if she will follow him

Through the woods, over mountains, along strands,
Among men like fiends that come in dreams;

she replies:

I will follow you. We will leave to-morrow.
Do not blame me. Are you an angel or a demon to me?
I know not, but I am your slave.
Wherever you go I will go. Wherever you stop I will stop.
Why do I act thus—I cannot tell.
Only I want to see you evermore.
When the sound of your receding footstep dies,
Then do I feel that my heart stops beating. I keep longing for you;
And as soon as I detect the awaited step that I love
Then I breathe and I live again.

Occasionally the Byronic hero vanishes altogether in *Hernani* to make way for the poet, and we find several beautiful scenes like the following, which, by the tone and the setting, betray reminiscences of the plays of Shakespeare.

*Hernani*: The liquid light of thy eyes is a rapture to me
Sing me some song, such as you used to sing at eve,
With tears in those dark orbs of thine.
Let us be happy now and drink, the cup is full.
The hour is ours, all the rest is but folly.
How sweet to love, to be loved, to be but two alone
To speak of love in the stillness of the night.
Oh, let me rest, let me sleep on thy heart, Doña Sol, my love.
Doña Sol, divine.

*Doña Sol*: The alarm bell. Dost thou hear?
*Hernani*: No, it is our bridal bell.

(noise, rumor, confused cries. . . .)

*Doña Sol*: Rise! Fly—Great God, the town is lighting up.
*Hernani*: A torchlight wedding for us.
*Doña Sol*: The nuptials of the dead and of the tomb.

(noise of swords, cries.)

*A Mountaineer*: My Lord, the runners, the alcades
rushed out in cavalcades.

*Doña Sol*: Ah! you were right!
*Mountaineers*: Help.
*Hernani*: Here I come. It is well.
Lady Morgan and other critics had complained that they did not find in our classical dramas those philosophic reflections which abound in the plays of Shakespeare. And, in fact, seldom if ever does the classical dramatist, absorbed as he is by the development of the passion he portrays, stop to ponder over human life. In Dumas, on the contrary, not infrequently do we come across such romantic meditations. In Victor Hugo we also find the unfailing soliloquies on ambition and thirst for power in which Dumas had already indulged; but we also meet other meditations, Shakespearian in spirit, but unmistakably belonging to Victor Hugo in their expression. The old Duke, who is about to marry his niece, Doña Sol, suddenly wakes up to the tragic conflict between his love and his age.

I am ashamed. What mockery that this love
Which to the heart brings back such joy and warmth
Should halt and but rejuvenate the soul, forgetful of the body.
When I see a youthful swain singing blithe and gay
In the green meadows, often I muse and in my dismal path
I murmur low. Oh, I would give my battlemented towers,
And ancient dungeon, my fields of corn, my forest lands
And flocks that graze on the hills, my name
And ancient titles, and all I have for his new made hut
And his youthful brow; for his hair is raven black
And his eyes shine like yours, and you may see such a young man,
And think of me so old. I know...

But believe me the frivolous swains have not so much
Love within their hearts as on their tongues.

... We love the best. Our steps are slow, our eyes are dim,
Our brows are furrowed, but the heart is never wrinkled.

And, truly Shakespearian again in its tragic sadness, its intensely dramatic and poetical expression is the end of the play, on the night of the wedding of Hernani and Doña Sol. Doña Sol and Hernani, who now has recovered his titles, his lands and his ancient château, remain alone on
the terrace for a moment while masks and dominos move about the palace.

_Hernani:_ Come, look upon the lovely night,
   All is over now, the torches out, the music done, everything is silent.
   The moon just now from the horizon rose,
   Even while you were speaking to me her trembling light
   And thy voice, together, reached my heart and I felt happy...

_Doña Sol:_ This silence is too deep and too profound the calm,
   Would you not like to see a star shine forth from the deep sky
   And to hear a voice of the night, a nightingale in moss or shadow lost,
   Or a flute far off.

Thereupon, the sound of a horn is heard and a mask in black domino enters to remind Hernani of his pledge to die when called upon by the Duke.

_The Mask:_ Whatsoever may happen, what the place, the hour
   Whenever to thy mind it seems the hour has come for me to die
   Blow on this horn and all will be done;
   This compact had the dead for witnesses.
   Is it done?

_Hernani:_ Oh for pity's sake. Wait until to-morrow, if thou hast a heart or soul.
   If you are not a ghost just escaped from the flames,
   If you are not a soul accursed, forever lost.

_The Mask:_ Childish it is for you to jest thus. To-morrow!
   Why! the bell this morning tolled thy funeral
   And if I were to die to-night who would come to take thee to-morrow.

In vain does Doña Sol, in a very poignant scene threaten, then entreat her uncle; he refuses to relent, and as she cannot protect Hernani from his oath, she snatches the poison from his hand, drinks, adding

   Grieve not for I have left thee thy share,
   Not so with you, you would not have left me mine.
There is, unquestionably, an echo of the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet in the last moments of Hernani and Doña Sol.

The circumstances under which the play was presented are well known and have been related many a time. Hernani was rehearsed in an atmosphere of intrigue and hostility. Victor Hugo's friends, dreading even la claque, that is the paid applauders who stimulate the enthusiasm of the audiences, gathered more than three hundred students and artists or would-be artists, gave them tickets, brought them to the theatre at three in the afternoon. They came most of them with long and glossy manes, some with silk hats, quite a few dressed in very extravagant manner, and all ready for the worst. The interruptions started from the very first scene, but were met by vigorous blows. The fighting which ensued took on such a character that the day, the 25th of February, 1830, is always spoken of as "the battle of Hernani". The play was given for forty-five consecutive nights. Hernani was as much of a pugilistic as of a literary success; but, after Hernani, the existence of the Romantic drama was no longer questioned. No one could deny that it was possible to write a play abounding in pathetic and moving situations, filled with beautiful lyrical or descriptive pieces, while disregarding the rules.

Dumas, who so far had clung to the historical drama, having realized the great impression made on the public by fatal, Byronic heroes, proceeded in his turn to exploit the Byronic vein. Hitherto the Romantic dramatists had limited themselves to the past, but Dumas, extreme in everything, having given up Walter Scott, introduces on the stage modern characters, contemporaries, dressed in modern clothes, "in the ugly short black coat", as he himself said. His Antony, produced in May, 1831, stamped
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him as the founder of the modern drama of passion. The hero, Antony, is another forlorn soul, a man marked by Fate, without a family, who keeps pondering over his sad fate; “other men have a father, a mother, a brother, arms which open for them when they are in trouble. I have not so much as a tombstone upon which I can read my name and weep. Other men have a country, I have none. I belong to no family. One name meant for me more than everything else and that name I am forbidden to pronounce”. The name is that of the woman he loved and was about to marry, but who married another while he was absent in Africa, whither he went to seek traces of his father—as he was an illegitimate child, a foundling, and could not marry without a name. The portrait of the hero has been thought to be that of Dumas himself. Why he should send him to Africa is perhaps not as perplexing as on first glance it may seem. On his return, Antony, who had left for two weeks and has remained away for two years, happens to save the life of Adèle, his former fiancée, and is brought to her house wounded. When shortly after she asks him to leave, reminding him of her moral obligations, he asks her why he should submit to social conventions and to any of the laws of a society against which he rebels. “I have received nothing but injustice. I owe nothing but hatred.” Finally, after all sorts of highly romantic adventures, Antony, rather than bow before the inevitable and accept the marriage of Adèle, murders her with his own hand in very dramatic circumstances.

The play has been rightly called “a symphony of raging passion”. In some of its situations it falls little short of the brutal and primitive. The exaltation of passion is so intense that we, to-day, can hardly help smiling at some of the scenes. Not so with the contemporaries of Dumas.
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We are told that "the handsome green coat, which he wore on the first night of Antony, was actually torn off his shoulders into scraps which his admirers carefully preserved as relics".

Such a hero as Antony cannot be repeated, and soon we find Dumas, the novelist, coming to the rescue of Dumas, the dramatist. In Richard d'Arlington we have another type of romantic and slightly Byronic hero, but in an English setting. Richard, also, is a foundling, who, through politics, becomes one of the most influential men in his country. To satisfy his insatiable ambition he is about to marry again after actually throwing his wife out of the window, when his father, who has been hovering about the drama, reveals his identity. Richard is the son of the public executioner, the hangman, in England. The next year Dumas tries to vie with Victor Hugo in a semi-historical drama, or rather melodrama, La Tour de Nesle. Victor Hugo had published, in 1831, his famous historical novel, Notre Dame de Paris, which centres around the French cathedral of the same name. The central figure in Dumas' play is the old tower of Nesle, of evil repute, where so many orgies had taken place and so many crimes had been committed that it was the subject of weird tales and superstitions. One cannot study the play without concluding that Dumas has found his way and is at last following his own path. Unfortunately, as the influence of Scott, Byron, Shakespeare, and Schiller kept diminishing, that of Dumas, the novelist, became more and more evident, and in La Tour de Nesle there is as much of Dumas, the novelist, with his untiring imagination, as of Dumas, the dramatist, the Romantic drama reaching a level which is hardly higher than that of the popular novel.
The amazing thing is that Victor Hugo should, for a while, have followed Dumas on such a popular, slippery, and on the whole unattractive path. Hugo, a born poet, goes so far as to give up his unique command of poetical forms to compete with Dumas in prose. *La Roi S'Amuse*, a play somewhat like *La Tour de Nesle*, was written in verse, but the three following dramas, *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Marie Tudor*, and *Angelo*, were written in prose, and are scarcely better than melodrama. In vain does Victor Hugo, in a famous preface, announce that he has found a new dramatic formula. In vain does he explain that if you want noble sentiments to shine in all their splendor you must set them off against an ignoble background; Lucrezia Borgia, for instance, a criminal and depraved woman, who, nevertheless, kept the purest kind of love for her son, being chosen to illustrate such a noble sentiment as maternal love. No drama can thrive on such sensational and often unpalatable contrasts.

Returning to poetry and to Spain as a background, Victor Hugo, in 1838, composed one of his best written and best constructed dramas, *Ruy Blas*. There is still something highly romantic, almost fantastic, in this story of a lackey in love with the Queen, whose love is returned, and who becomes the prime minister of Spain, only to kill himself through sense of honor when finally he is exposed as a former lackey. *Ruy Blas* is particularly significant in one respect, in the evolution of the Romantic drama. It is the play in which the comic element blends best with the tragic and lyrical element of the drama. It contains a unique character, Don César de Bazan, a ruined Spanish nobleman, a true poet with a keen sense of humor, a truant with a high sense of honor, whose sentiments are most noble when his life is most irregular. One is rather surprised to find this
belated comic element playing such an important part in a Romantic drama in 1837, at a time when the Romantic dramatists had completely forgotten their principles and theories of 1827 and 1830. In 1838 the Romanticists were no longer united by the same ambitions, but competing among themselves, struggling frantically to satisfy the taste of an insatiable public, and looking, every day, for newer and stronger situations and characters.

The Romantic drama is not, far from it, the best achievement of our Romanticism, but its influence should not be overlooked, nor should it be too severely criticised because of its sensational and almost morbid quest for novelty. It met the requirements of its generation. Every element which had been in demand since 1817, from the poetical metaphors to the philosophical reflections and to the combination of comedy and tragedy, eventually came in. The part played by Walter Scott, Byron, and especially Shakespeare, first in creating the desire for that drama, then conceiving and executing it, is no small one. It is difficult to estimate our precise debt to each of our two great Romantic dramatists. Victor Hugo, who is closer to Shakespeare than Dumas, seems to have brought in the poetical element, the local color, the meditations which are lacking in the classical drama. Dumas, who was prompt to realize that Shakespeare was not susceptible of imitation, soon found himself, and introduced the modern man on the stage, threw the drama open to events, incidents and adventures such as were previously recorded only in novels. He brought into the drama an intense life and passion, and he gave up the poetical form. Thus, while the Romantic drama gained in physical activity, it lost in nobility and inspiration. Unfortunately Dumas had never thoroughly experienced that
delight
And triumph of the poet, who would say
A man's mere 'yes,' a woman's common 'no,' . . .
And says the word so that it burns you through
With a special revelation. . . .

There is no special revelation in the later dramas of Dumas,
and when he had completed his task the modern drama was
already looming on the horizon.