The Deformed Transformed as a Gothic Story:
Byron's Political Intention in Portraying an Obscure Hero

The Gothic story is a literary genre that combines elements of both terror or horror and romance. Its origin is usually attributed to Horace Walpole’s 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*. Later, it had much success with those popular Gothic novels like Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* and William Wilson, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. This genre has so far been considered as one of the origins of detective stories and even science fictions. In this paper, I should like to examine whether Byron’s unfinished drama *The Deformed Transformed* is a Gothic story or not. (I will call this drama *D.T* hereafter.) To state my conclusion first, there is enough evidence that *D.T* is a kind of Gothic story.

Byron once lived in Italy and Switzerland to work together with Mary Shelley and her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, who wrote two pieces of Gothic story, too. They often spent their time in talking about Gothic and ghost stories with each other there. This biographical fact leads us to suppose that Byron attempted to write Gothic stories as well. In fact, *Manfred* and *The Prisoner of Chillon* are well-known as a kind of Gothic stories. The problem is that the Gothic story has been called ‘Gothic romance’ or ‘Gothic novel’, which implies that it is written in prose. But Byron’s *D.T* is written in

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verse. Byron writes in the preface to *D.T.* that ‘This production is founded partly on the story of a Novel called *The Three Brothers* published many years ago…” *The Three Brothers: A Romance* was written by Joshua Pickersgill and published in 1803. This novel has been classified as a Gothic novel, because it contains typical settings and motifs of Gothic stories in prose, not in verse. This strongly suggests that Byron did intend to write *D.T.* as a Gothic story like *Manfred* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Strangely, however, Byron did not subtitle it a Gothic Story nor a Gothic Romance, but simply “A Drama.” I should like to suggest here that this naming is based on his hidden political intention. What is the political intention, then? Before answering this question, let us define what a Gothic story is in the first place. As I mentioned already, the founder of this genre has been said to be Horace Walpole (1717-1797) who wrote *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). *The Castle of Otranto* tells us the secrets of a big family, namely, who is the usurper of the castle and who is a real successor of the heritage. The wicked protagonist tries to monopolise the ancestral estate of the family by murdering his wife, its true heiress. The husband kills even his new young wife to keep everything to himself. If she is not killed, she is doomed to be confined in a dark space like the mad woman in Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). The heroines of these Gothic stories are endangered by their male counterparts in their ancestral houses or castles. Thus as times went, many readers and writers came to believe that the Gothic story is a kind of fairy story like that of Cinderella. For example, Jane Austen, who wrote
Northanger Abbey (1818), thus tried to admonish the romantic readers that they should read novels of realism and see the world as it really is. In the 20th century, Surrealists came into being and reevaluated the Gothic story which had been looked down on as a fantastic and non-intellectual story of anachronistic things, exclusively designed for the girls before marriage. Surrealists found it to be an art made out of the real world with free imagination. But they could not recognize the deeper intention of Walpole and other Gothic writers. They did not see why Gothic writers chose Italian terrible castles as the settings of their Gothic novels. In my hypothesis, Walpole wanted to attract and impress his readers with terror and expected them to read his novel as an ancient story like a legend, not as a description of the real world. Therefore on the first page of the first edition of The Castle of Otranto published in December 1764, as you see in my handout, he writes as the title ‘The Castle of Otranto, A Story, Translated by William Marshal, Gent. From the Original Italian of ONUPHRIO MURALTO, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto, etc.’ This title implies that Walpole wanted to conceal his name and his real intention. This book sold very well and came to be known to be an original fiction written by the son of Robert Walpole, the first prime minister of British Empire. Horace Walpole published the second edition, next year, April, 1765, just 5 months later than the publication of the first edition. This time the title was ‘The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story.’ He merely wrote ‘Hor’ as his name. He deleted the phrase ‘Translated by William Marshal, Gent. From the Original Italian of ONUPHRIO
MURALTO, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto’. Now the author’s name was, if partly, announced publicly. But its appearance of nonsensical fairy tales prevented the readers from understanding the true reason why he wrote this novel. Besides, the subtitle ‘A Gothic Story’ functioned as the convenient mask for critics to comment freely without public censorship. But Walpole’s real intention in writing this Gothic novel was to express his doubt on the legitimacy of the royal family and even the ruling class of his times. Four years after the first publication of *The Castle of Otranto* he dared to write another book entitled *Historic Doubts on the Life and Region of King Richard the Third* in 1768, in which he expressed his doubt on their legitimacy more openly. It was just before he retired from Parliament, when he had nothing to be scared of. In this historical essay, he expresses what he thought about the status quo of the political establishment more frankly than in his novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. He examines the legitimacy of Tudor Dynasty as can be seen in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. *The Castle of Otranto* is far from being a simple anachronistic tale. Just like *Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire des sciences, des arts et des métiers* written by Diderot and D’Alembert in France between 1751 and 1772, it is a critical and satirical writing which urges the readers to cast a cold eye on the legitimacy of their political leaders.

Now the protagonist and setting of Byron’s *D.T.* look more Gothic than those of *Manfred* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Arnold, protagonist of *D.T.* has an obscure birth, a deformed body, an ambition to climb the social ladder while its setting consists of a
noble city, a castle wall, a pitched battle, a beautiful heroine in danger, etc. Byron did not subtitle this story a Gothic Drama or Something, but simply “A Drama.” Byron, I suppose, was afraid that if it were subtitled a Gothic Drama or Something, many of the readers after *The Castle of Otranto* would soon recognize his political intention and brace themselves for its dangerous ideology. The problem here is what aspects are dangerous with *D.T.* There is no reference to the problem of legitimacy or rich property in it. All the problems we find here are the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, ugly and beautiful shapes, a strange demon and a commonplace woodcutter, a passionate hero and a cool heroine, and so on. This is a rather everyday urban romance like D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. The readers of the democratic 21st century, immune to any kind of terror would not feel horrified with this drama at all. The dangerous aspect of this drama, if any, concerns the social position of the woodcutter Arnold. Almost all the heroes of the traditional Gothic stories belong to the ranks at least higher than knighthood or gentlemanship. But Arnold, protagonist of *D.T.* is a poor woodcutter. Besides, he is hunch-backed and even limps. He is quite unlike a hero of the traditional Gothic novel.

When we turn our eyes to France just before the French Revolution, we will easily understand how dangerous and threatening Arnold’s position is. In 1764, *The Castle of Otranto* was published in the U.K., and then in France a famous playwright Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799) published *Le Barbier de Seville*.
and *Le Mariage de Figaro* in 1775 and in 1778 respectively. These two plays have Figaro in common. He is a commonplace barber, but still he is the hero in these stories. On the other hand, noble men and rich men have become laughing stocks. In *Le Barbier de Seville*, Count Almaviva loves Rosina, whom her guardian wants to marry to obtain her great heritage. But Rosina loves young Almaviva and would not obey the guardian’s advice. This story is most faithful to the standard pattern of the Gothic story. Maybe, because of it, after the big success of *Le Barbier de Seville*, although Beaumarchais finished writing *Le Mariage de Figaro* in 1778, he had to wait for the first performance at Comedy Française until 1784. It was regarded as a dangerous work which has a political intention to attack the ancient regime and defend the third class, the bourgeoisie on the eve of the 1789 revolution.

After the Revolution, therefore, it was rather risky to speak or write about the common hero of obscure birth in the U.K as well. In *D.T.* Byron described Arnold, a deformed woodcutter as a hero, not a handsome clever man like Figaro. Therefore his intention is more distinct than in Beaumarchais’s. Byron intended to convey his political intention by the deliberate use of the main title and subtitle *The Deformed Transformed: A Drama*. The words “transformed” and “deformed” are supposed to have sounded quite new and unique as the title of a Gothic story in his days. So is the term “drama”.

In France, the word ‘drama’ was given a new meaning by a French writer Denis Diderot (1713 - 1784), a leader of the Encyclopedists who wrote about ‘le drame bourgeois’. In
Greek tradition, dramas had been classified into two genres, tragedy and comedy. To this tradition he introduced the new dramatic genre, tragicomedy to expose and criticise the traditional reality of family and society. In this new genre only a common man can be a hero at last like Figaro. It was the second transition from gods to supermen who could be a hero in Greek myths. Influenced greatly by Diderot, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, as I mentioned already, produced many tragicomedies and contributed to the popularisation of this new dramatic genre. Thus the term drama had come to sound very dangerous to people in France those days. In England, however, people did not feel it so much dangerous yet. This may be the reason why Byron used the term drama as the subtitle of *D.T.* instead of *A Gothic Story*. Byron might enjoy the two kinds of sound of the word “drama” to the audience in France and in England.

The terror of *D.T.* as a Gothic drama is much greater than that of Poe’s *William Wilson*, as the terror of the latter is simply caused not by any external object, but by an internal agent, the protagonist’s doppelganger. On the contrary, Arnold, the deformed protagonist threatens to change the traditional social structure itself. Like Cain who curses his compulsory inherited original sin, Arnold curses his inborn handicap and wants to be transformed into a totally new man. Although it was a dangerous thing to write a story with a common man as a hero in his times, Byron ventured to do it with acute irony. Judging from the note which Byron wrote in the margin of the draft of *D.T.*, we can surmise what the endings of *D.T.* are like. For example, Arnold may kill
Olimpia, who is, if not affectionate, always cool and obedient to Arnold. Also he may kill Caesar, who wears Arnold’s old ugly shape and still is loved by Olimpia. It is his jealousy that will cause Arnold to kill them. Ultimately Arnold may die like William Wilson. What Byron describes in *D.T.* is not such abstract entities as in Poe’s Gothic works, but ordinary human beings. Anyway, what *D.T.* exposes and criticises is an evil aspect of the real world in which the ordinary human beings live. The real world is naturally more dangerous than the abstract one. It may be now clear that Byron’s *The Deformed Transformed* is nothing but a Gothic story designed to criticise and change the real world. So, Byron hides his political intention. Indeed, Byron is a man, mad, bad, and dangerous to know.