Romantic Symbolic Poem I: Coleridge

READING 10 *Osorio. A Tragedy* (1797)

Composition, staging & publication history:

* composed in 8 months (April - November) in 1797 in Nether Stowey
* C’s second drama, the first co-written with Southey (*The Death of Robespierre*, 1794); written at the invitation from Sheridan to write a tragedy on a popular subject
* originally rejected by *Drury Lane* for being too obscure
* planned to be published with Wordsworth’s drama, *The Borderers*; instead, extracts ‘The Dungeon’ and ‘The Foster-Mother’s Tale’ printed in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).
* a revision of *Osorio* in 1812, successfully produced at Drury Lane in January 1813 as

*Remorse* (Byron’s supportive involvement while a member of the Drury Lane Committee)

* immensely successful (show ran 20 nights) and 3 print runs in a year.
* positive reviews at the time, but scorned by later, Victorian critics as a derivative pastiche written for commercial gain

Context:

* Coleridge translated Schiller’s *Piccolomini* and *The Death of Wallenstein* (published 1800). Schiller’s Venetian mystery novel, *The Ghost-seer* (*Der Geisterseher*, 1789) provides inspiration for the plot, and for the séance scene in *Osorio/Remorse* (there are also parallels – brotherly feud over a love interest – with *The Robbers*)
* apart from *Osorio/Remorse* and *Robespierre*, C writes one more drama, inspired by *The Winter’s Tale*,called *Zapolya. A Christmas Tale* (1815), once more rejected by Drury Lane for being too poetic and serious.
* *Osorio/Remorse*: drama set in 16th-century Spain (Granada), staging the conflict between the Moors and the Spanish
* use of Gothic elements (including the Spanish Renaissance setting) in an effort to use them for slightly different effect (not simply terror and horror or stock exoticism)
* Moor characters: dynamics of Occident/Orient clash (religion, culture) and persecution based on faith (Islam vs Catholicism) and ethnicity.
* use of dreams, mock-supernatural elements and mock-magic tricks to reveal the truth of Osorio’s treachery
* revolutionary zeal of *Osorio* much reduced in the later version, *Remorse*

Complexities:

* exemplary woman vs transgressive woman (Maria / Alhadra)
* moral opacity (Osorio: ‘Are we not all predestined rottenness / And cold dishonour?’)
* persecution by Catholic Church/Inquisition (Francesco ‘busy, gross, ignorant, and cruel’); the Moor revolt; Albert and Maurice’s past service for ‘the heroic Prince of Orange’, i.e. protestant
* radical contingency of events / absent events and their staged repetition
* phantasmic relationships; action motivated by irrationality, yielding accidental death and limited or no moral
* power of representations (picture, assumed apparel): ‘And what the mind believes impossible, / The bodily sense is slow to recognize’ (II, ii, 195).
* dissolution of cause and effect: ‘this same world of ours— It is a puddle in a storm of rain, / And we the air-bladders, that course up and down, / And joust and tilt in merry tournament’ (V, i, 145-7)
* limits to perfectibility / atonement; ubiquity of violence; alienation
* inadequacy/cruelty of punitive measures in society – the Dungeon: ‘And this place my forefathers made for men! / This is the process of our love and wisdom / To each poor brother who offends against us— / Most innocent, perhaps—and what if guilty? / Is this the only cure?’ (V, i, 107-111)
* erosion of tragedy

Parallels with *The Ancient Mariner* and ‘The Wanderings of Cain’:

* explorations of liminality and moral ambiguity
* performance of sin and guilt (remorse)
* the possibility and impossibility of redemption
* the supernatural and the imagination – ever-present spectrality, opacity of ‘reality’
* variations on the Gothic
* fratricide
* radical contingency of events

Food for thought:

* Alhadra’s revolutionary finale:

This arm should shake the kingdoms of the world;

The deep foundations of iniquity

Should sink away, earth groaning from beneath them;

[…]

Till desolation seemed a beautiful thing,

And all that wore and had the spirit of life

Sang a new song to him who had gone forth

Conquering and still to conquer! (V.1.313-21)

* Opening stage directions underscoring the parallels with contemporary oppression (abolition of Habeas Corpus, Sedition Act etc.):

*Time. The reign of Philip II., just at the close of the civil wars against the Moors, and during the heat of the persecution which raged against them, shortly after the edict which forbad the wearing of Moresco apparel under pain of death.*