

**“Video meliora proboque; Deteriora sequor”<sup>1</sup>**

***The Deformed Transformed* in the tradition of *Metamorphoses* and the  
genre of Mock Heroic**

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The problem of the circumstances which led to the publication of Byron’s unfinished drama *The Deformed Transformed* still remains to be solved. I have to quote from Medwin, an anecdote from whom forms an important part of my paper. He writes,

[... in February 1822 Byron handed Shelley a MS copy of the drama at Pisa and told him]:  
 ‘Shelley, I have been writing a *Faustish* kind of drama: tell me what you think of it.’  
 [Shelley replied]: ‘Least ... of any thing I ever saw of yours. It is a bad imitation of  
 “Faust;” and besides, there are two entire lines of Southey’s in it.’ ...  
 ‘Lord Byron changed colour immediately, and asked hastily what lines? ...’<sup>2</sup>

Shelley quoted Southey’s lines. Then, to Medwin’s surprise, Byron, without saying anything, “instantly threw the copy of the drama into the fire. He seemed to feel no chagrin at seeing it consume—at least his countenance betrayed none, and his conversation became more gay and lively than usual.”<sup>3</sup>

Medwin was not sure whether it was hatred of Southey, or respect for Shelley’s opinions, that made Byron commit an act that Medwin considered a sort of suicide. Medwin was far more surprised to see, two years afterwards, the publication of *The Deformed Transformed* announced, as he believed that it had been burned at Pisa. It has been supposed that Byron must have had another copy of the manuscript, or had re-written it, without changing a word except omitting the *Kehama* lines. Indeed, Byron had a remarkably retentive memory. Medwin believes that Byron could have quoted almost every line he ever wrote. As these ideas are necessary to my discussion, I will quote further from Barry Weller’s commentary to *The Deformed Transformed*.

Another of Byron’s friends, Trelawny, writes about a different circumstance of the drama’s publication in his letter to Murray dated 15th January 1833. He writes:

‘This is a plumper—I was in the room—*half a sheet* of M.S. of *The Deformed Transformed* was given to Shelley to read—which had been written in the night—& that half which was destroyed [*sic*]—other parts which Shelley had seen before he admired—& he said the lyrical incantation beginning “from the red earth like Adam” &c &c [I, i, 385] incomperable [*sic*].’<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on this passage of Trelawny’s letter, Barry Weller writes: ‘Apparently, Medwin also failed to understand that the dramatic subject from Calderón which Byron described to him ... was an indication of the direction in which *The Deformed Transformed* was to continue. However questionable Medwin’s reporting, Trelawny’s letter corroborated that Byron was working on *The Deformed Transformed* in the first few months of 1822.’<sup>5</sup>

On July 8th of the same year 1822 Shelley was drowned. According to Weller, Byron tried to help Mary Shelley’s financial situation by employing her to make transcripts of his manuscripts. We can see two of his three references to *The Deformed Transformed* in his letters concerned with her copying job. In his letter to Leigh Hunt dated 25th January 1823, Byron writes: ‘I am going on with the poeshie – and in the mean time I send to Mrs. S[helley] – a few Scenes more of drama before begun – for her transcriptive leisure.’<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, on 21st May 1823 Byron wrote to John Hunt about the collection of ‘all that I have published or unpublished except the *epigrams* ...’ into a ‘series of the size and shape of my former

1: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII, 20, and BLJ IX 77.

2: Medwin 153-4 (adapted).

3: Ibid.

4: Ibid., 155.

5: CPW VI 726.

6: BLJ X 90.

works'. He added, 'I have also *two parts* completed of an odd sort of drama—but I doubt if I shall go on with it.—I sent the two parts by this post—to Mr. K[innaird]—let me have a proof.'<sup>7</sup> There are no further references to *The Deformed Transformed* in Byron's surviving letters. It was not until 20th February 1824 that the Hunts published it in its present incomplete form.

This is a brief outline of the circumstances around the composition and publication of *The Deformed Transformed*. The problem here is, what it was that motivated Byron to dare to publish this play in the incomplete form through such a complicated procedure? This is a problem which puzzles me. Here I should like to suggest the hypothesis that Byron was trying to imitate the Greek and Roman classical writers like Homer, Virgil, and above all Ovid.

First of all, I want to suggest that the title of *The Deformed Transformed* reminds us of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is in Byron's library sale catalogue in the translation by Samuel Garth.<sup>8</sup> However, Byron himself refers to Goethe's *Faust* and Pickersgill's *The Three Brothers* as the sources of this drama. These two works have the theme of transformation in common. So it is almost certain that Byron intended to write this drama as a play with the theme of transformation. There is a big difference between his play and these two works, though. Unlike Goethe and Pickersgill, as is discussed later, Byron attempted to focus on the value of appearance and its power. Therefore for the moment I will examine the problem as to whether *The Deformed Transformed* is an unfinished drama in Ovid's style or not.

Did Byron merely intend to imitate the title of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? My answer to this question is definitely no. Byron might have known the background of the publication of *Metamorphoses*. Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso) was born in 43 BC and was supposed to have published *Metamorphoses* in AD 8 during the second period of his literary career, just before his exile to Tomis. The cause of his exile is not known. Some say he was exiled because his scandalous love poems and misconduct. But we do not know what kind of crime he attempted. We can only know that he himself alluded to his guilt in his later work *Tristia* (*Sorrows of an Exile*).

It is during the first period of his literary career that Ovid wrote love poems like *Amores* (*Loves*), *Heroides* (*Letters of Heroines*), *Ars Amatoria* (*Art of Love*) and *Remedia Amoris* (*Remedies of Love*) using an elegiac style. The elegiac style is something in between traditional epic style and lyric free style. This style uses hexameters in odd lines and pentameters in even lines. Therefore the elegiac style is useful for narrating a story rather than expressing smaller-scale thoughts. It also helps to express the emotion of lovers, or to compose amusing pieces.

During the second period, Ovid wrote *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* (*Calendar of Feasts*). They are said to have remained unfinished due to his death. He wrote *Calendar* in an elegiac style and then wrote *Metamorphoses* using only hexameters. However he again used an elegiac style to express his sorrow at his exile and to ask the Emperor's permission to return to Rome. Why did Ovid use a heroic style only for *Metamorphoses*? Hexameters had been exclusively used as the style for such heroic epics as Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Some researchers suggest that he wanted to write a mock-heroic poem to mock Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is long enough to be called an epic. It consists of fifteen books, the total number of lines in which is 12,000. But this epic-like poem does not depict the heroic actions of the gods and heroes from the Greek myths and legends. Ovid, a Roman poet living in peace time, mocked various episodes of Greek militaristic culture which had been handed down from one generation to another. It is said that Ovid threw his draft of *Metamorphoses* into the fire before he went to exile at Tomis. By this action he tried to mock what Virgil did just before he died. Virgil, on his death bed, wished the draft of the *Aeneid* to be burnt. His wish was not fulfilled. It was published after his death. Ovid imitated Virgil's action. *Metamorphoses* itself had already been published, though. He burned another copy of the draft just to express his sorrow and mock his forerunner. He writes in *Tristia*:

This, like so much of mine, when I departed  
I put into the fire with my own hand,  
And as a better sister than a mother,  
Althaea burnt her son in the burnt brand ...

He then continues:

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7: BLJ X 182.

8: CMP 238.

Judging it rough, unfinished, or the Muses,  
 Those sponsors of my guilt, had earned my hate.  
 It was not quite destroyed; there are survivors;  
 More copies I suppose there still must be.  
 I pray they live and please the lively leisure  
 Of readers and keep fresh my memory.<sup>9</sup>

What kind of emotion did Ovid really want to convey in his works as a whole? *Metamorphoses* helps us to understand it. Although its structure is expressed action clearly as those of epic poems invoking the gods and the theme, almost all of its contents concern “Love”. Ovid presumably intended to express a leisurely and idle atmosphere of love in city life. In other words, patriotic passion transformed to private and personal love, from manly to womanlike love.

As a matter of course, these are not sufficient enough to show that *Metamorphoses* is a product of Ovid’s challenge to write a mock-heroic poem. However, at least, the elegiac style which had already become established at his time could not meet the needs of the time. People wanted to spin stories to express not only their individual sentiments, but also the natural and social systems ruled by cause and effect, of which they were already aware. Ovid thus returned to the traditional style of epic.

I should like to suggest that what Byron intended to do in *The Deformed Transformed* is to mock traditional heroics, following Ovid’s example. If this suggestion is right, how did he do it? When he showed the draft to Shelley and got his negative answer, Byron became pale, as Medwin reported. However, I believe he recovered at once by remembering Ovid’s episode. We cannot know now if the burnt draft really contained lines from Southey or from *Faust*. It can easily be imagined that Byron did not publish this earliest original draft, as he found it full of undigested phrases and ideas which he borrowed from other writers. He wanted to replace these borrowed phrases and ideas with his own. Presumably this is why he did not publish the original draft. I really agree with Medwin and Goethe that the originality of the final version of *The Deformed Transformed* is beyond doubt. I suppose that revising his earliest draft, he thought of following Ovid’s example and burned it as complaisantly as possible with his mischievous smile. He must have had another copy of the draft, or had re-written it. As Medwin reported, Byron’s memory for his own writings was remarkably retentive.

Byron succeeded in creating *The Deformed Transformed* as a mock-heroic drama by making Arnold a heroic protagonist; not a traditional aristocratic warrior but an ordinary hunch-backed woodman. What we see here is the transformation of an ordinary plebeian into a heroic warrior, which often happened during the Italian Wars of the sixteenth century, the historical background of the drama. Byron knew the details of the wars from the book written by Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540). Interestingly, Arnold the woodman changes his character as well. At first, he takes the shape of Achilles as a warrior, and then Arnold-Achilles changes again into a man who looks for his personal happiness, a theme which is very similar to that of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Byron does not use heroic couplets in this play, which informs traditional mock-heroics. Almost all of the lines are written in blank verse.

Here I should like to examine the significance of Achilles, the shape of whom Arnold finally decides to take. Achilles is one of the heroes of the *Iliad*. Alexander Pope translated the *Iliad* into English. Let us look at the lines depicting Achilles in his translation:

Achilles’ Wrath, to Greece the direful Spring  
 Of woes unnumber’d, heav’nly Goddess, sing!  
 That Wrath which hurl’d to Pluto’s gloomy Reign  
 Whose Limbs unbury’d on the naked Shore  
 Devouring Dogs and hungry Vultures tore.  
 Since Great Achilles and Atrides strove,  
 Such was the Sov’reign Doom, and such the Will of Jove.  
 Declare, O Muse! In what ill-fated Hour  
 Sprung the fierce Strife, from what offended Pow’r? (*Iliad* I, ll.1-10.tr. Pope)

The theme of *The Deformed Transformed* is the same as that of the *Iliad*, namely the “Wrath” of Achilles. But unlike the *Iliad*, which begins with the invocation of a Goddess as is proper to traditional epics, *The Deformed Transformed* begins with the invocation of Arnold, a limping woodman, by his

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<sup>9</sup>: Ovid, *Sorrows of an Exile*. Translated by A.D. Melville. Oxford; O.U.P., 1995. p.17. (Book I.7.15-26.)

mother: but not with “Come!” – she cries out “Out, Hunchback!” and Arnold utters a cry of despair to the audience.

There is another big difference between the two works in the depiction of heroic characters. Usually, Achilles is understood as a consistently invincible hero who has only one weak point. But Arnold first appears as a common man and then transforms into a beautiful and brave Achilles-like hero thanks to the Stranger’s magical power. But as the drama develops, Arnold begins to complain of his unhappiness as a beautiful and brave lover. Judging from Byron’s memo in the fragment of Part III, “at first not liking Caesar – thus Arnold jealous of himself under his former figure, owing to the Power of Intellect &c. &c.”,<sup>10</sup> Arnold’s beloved Olimpia seems to prefer the Stranger as Arnold to Arnold as Achilles. Arnold gets jealous of the Stranger who now wears Arnold’s own old ugly shape. Arnold looks discontented. So the Stranger asks what is the matter with him. But he says nothing. Caesar mocks him:

Caesar:               This Marvellous Virgin – is a marble matron –  
                          An idol – but a cold one to your heart  
                          Promethean – and unkindled by your torch?  
Arnold:               Slave! (*The Deformed Transformed*. Part III. ll.87-9)

Still Arnold wants to know any way for him to win Olimpia’s love even if he became a slave, so asks again:

Arnold:               Teach me the way to win this woman’s love –  
Caesar:               Leave her. –  
Arnold:               Were that the path – I’d not pursue it.  
Caesar:               No doubt – for if you did – the remedy  
                          Would be for a disease already cured. –  
Arnold:               All wretched as I am – I would not quit  
                          My unrequited love for all that’s happy –  
Caesar:               You have possessed the woman – still possess –  
                          What need you more? –  
Arnold:               To be myself possess –  
                          To be her heart as she is mine. – (*The Deformed Transformed*. III ll.93-101)

This is a typical example of what is implied by the Latin phrase from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* “Video meliora proboque; Deteriora sequor,” meaning “I see the good thing, and I recognize that; I follow the worst.” Arnold, a stronger warrior than Bourbon the nobleman, wants to return to being a common man and live as a happy husband.

Byron deliberately prepares the drama for this change of Arnold. Achilles appears at first as a “Swift-footed Achilles” in Homer’s *Iliad* and even in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. They are consistently invincible and finally killed only by God. As the ages go on, this image of Achilles suffers change. The well-known story of Achilles’ tendon appears. This change can be seen in the *Thebaid*, written by Publius Papinius Statius in the first century AD. Statius tells a story of Achilles who is invulnerable in his whole body except an old wound on his heel. Achilles’ mother forgot to steep his heels in the sacred water which enables men to be immortal. Statius made the story a tragicomedy by introducing an adulterer Paris into it. Hereafter, Achilles has been said to have a vital weak point. This aspect of Achilles, however, can be seen already in Homer’s *Odyssey*, which Byron would have read in the original. Odysseus goes down to hell, and meets many shadows there. One of them is Achilles. He asks Achilles to rule as a king in hell. But Achilles rejects this, and answers:

Talk not of ruling in this dol’rous gloom,  
Nor think vain words (he cry’d) can ease my doom;  
Rather I chuse laboriously to bear  
A weight of woes, and breath the vital air,  
A slave to some poor hind that toils for bread;  
Than reign the scepter’s monarch of the dead. (Homer, *Odyssey*, tr.Pope. XI. ll.595-600)

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10: CPW VI 574.

And later, when Achilles is told that his son is now a good and successful warrior, he disappears with great satisfaction. Achilles himself desires to become a common man. He had lived as a hero and fought against enemies to protect his motherland, but now wants to live as an ordinary citizen. As a common man, he truly asks for the offering of his beloved Polixena's dead body in front of his grave, which is reflected later in Byron's *Arnold*. He insists on the dead body of Olympia, whom the Stranger described as a "marble maid". In his letter to John Shepherd of Decembr 8th 1821, Byron quotes from *Metamorphoses*: "Video meliora proboque; Deteriora sequor,"<sup>11</sup> Byron is well aware how paradoxical man's nature is. Although man knows the heroic life to be far better than ordinary life, he is doomed to choose an ordinary life.

Byron himself wished happily to live as a common man, but his fate did not allow him to live such a life. His wish can better be expressed in other forms than in heroic-epic. Ovid attempted to express his wish of the same kind in *Metamorphoses*, using hexameters, and love stories in which heroes change their characters. Byron attempted to match Ovid's achievement in his traditional manner, and deviated from it by writing *The Deformed Transformed*.

This might be a reflection of Byron's attitude to heroes. In *Don Juan*, he writes:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,  
 When every year and month sends forth a new one,  
 Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,  
 The age discovers he is not the true one;  
 Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,  
 I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan,  
 We all have seen him in the pantomime  
 Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time. (*Don Juan*. Canto I, St. I)

What Byron describes in *The Deformed Transformed* is not a traditional hero. He there tries to follow the example of Ovid, who employed mock-heroic style to query Virgil's evaluation of heroes. Byron's problem was that he was cursed by a romantic nature, trapped ("cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd") within a deformed body – a nature capable of aspiration, within a physique only partially able to carry that aspiration through. At the same time, his critical and satirical mind queried all aspiration. *The Deformed Transformed* is his incomplete way of exploring these two parallel but contrasting dilemmas.

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11: BLJ IX 77.