

The Misrepresentation of the Druse Community in Browning's Unsuccessful Tragedy "The Return of the Druses" 1843: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

There are a number of literary texts which earn their *raison d'être* from the exotic nature or unfamiliar features in the subject matter of the creative work. One of the brilliant and of standing poets of all ages is Robert Browning. Robert Browning (1812-1889) chose a literary genre alien to his powers as a poet, and a topic beyond the range of a man who had little firsthand knowledge of the Levant. Since he had the power to transfer historical stories magically to forever recited and read poems all over the world and through all ages till the recent one. This poet composed a tragic play entitled *The return of the Druses* (1843). Literary histories tell us that it was a failure on all accounts. One of the logical reasons for this failure was presumably Browning's ignorance of the culture he wished to depict in this work. This article is an analysis of the play, to which very little attention was paid even by the specialists in Browning studies. The conclusion is that Browning provided for the readers and spectators a rather weak image of the Druses as individuals and as a community. They are shown to be gullible and misguided as a community. Their leadership is shown as cunning, dishonest, and Machiavellian.

KEY WORDS: Browning as A Playwright, Druse Image, Victorian Tragedy

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of the play was probably suggested by the information about the Druses, and other Lebanese communities, in the *Biographie Universelles*. Browning also consulted Defoe's *Dictionaries of all Religions*. But, all the use he made was to derive some common Druse names, and some Druse costumes. The characters, the action, the historical period, and the place are all pure imagination. No Druses of any group or tribe are known to have lived in the 15th century in Rhodes Devance p.5.

This makes the play more articulated about Browning's own vision of the Druse. He created the Druse whom he had imagined but never met with. The poet is at liberty here to express his views about a situation and a set of characters, since he is their source as a creator. It is the only work by Browning, as far as we know, which brings the Druse and the European face to face each other.

The return of the Druses is about a group of Druses deported away from Lebanon are in Rhodes in the 1400s. They suffer a tyrannical rule of the prefect Djabal, a young man who is the last survivor of the former sheikhs, emerges among the groups. He plans to liberate them and to return to Lebanon. He claims to be the reincarnation of Hakeem (Hakim Biamrillah, the third Fatimite Caliph) to lead the way back home. After many intrigues, he dies with his beloved cousin Anael at the moment of the Druses' triumphant departure.

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2. THE RETURN OF THE DRUSES AS A PLAY

In his diary, Browning wrote that he wanted to write a play different from those dominant and popular on the British stage then. He wanted a play with its action conducted within character. Action in character rather than character in action. This play, which according to Browning fulfilled his own prerequisites, was unstaged, and McReady, the stage manager to whom it was written, saw it unfit for performance (Jack, 1973, p. 68).

The reason has to do first with the obscurity of the play's characters in comparison to those in Bulwer Lytton's *Lady of Lyons*, *Richelieu*, and *Money*. The stage manager would refuse to stage Browning's play. Second, the reason has to do with the manner in which Browning conceived or thought of the dramatic art. In his diary and letters, Browning insisted on a dramatic piece for the depiction of an unfamiliar character, rather than having a character in action. He wanted to present a set of characters rather than a plot (Devance, 1935, p.123).

The reason can hardly constitute a major difference from what the other dramatists before Browning had been doing. The character pushes the action forward because of an inner motive or internal interaction. If Browning had wanted action to take place inside his characters, then the dramatic piece would have been quite static which is wrong to have in any play: Simply because there is a beginning and an end. Most probably, Browning was contemplating what later characterized his poetry: The internal dramatic (Jack, 1973, p.68-123).

The play, as far as we know, has never been acted. However, it can be an actable play for the same reason that had been conjured up to let it down that is characterization the play is a study of human nature and behavior under conditions to Druses. It is also an exploration of the potentials of love under reconditions of master versus mastered, juxtapositioning the Europeans to Druses. It is interesting, perhaps, to know that Browning's original purpose in writing the play was to explore which party was the more generous and bountiful in love, or who is the better lover, men or women. No less interesting and significant is the fact that the poet chose the Druse community for the said exploration of love. This might signify the role model that he ascribes to the Druses here and elsewhere.

The characters can be divided into two categories: The Druses, and the Europeans. There is, generally, mutual admiration between the two groups, though this is not the rule. Loys de Drux admires the Druse girl. Hakeem admires the developed arms at the European's disposal. Thus, there are qualitative differences within each group's vision of the other. There are some Druses, such as Ayoob, Raghieb, Khalil, and Ma'ani, who unquestionably believe in their cause. There are others refuse to support it unless Djabal Hakeem performs a miracle. That the performance of a miracle be criterion

for one's loyalty to one's cause reflects the influence of the Europeans on the Druses. The aim of this influence is to keep the Druse unaware, indifferent, and ignorant. This is practiced by the cardinal in this play. In the long run, this practice proves double-edged and turns against the Europeans themselves.

3. THE ANALYSIS

The fact that Browning viewed these Druses as deported away from their homeland makes it clear that he considered them as victims of racial discrimination chiefly in the hand of the Europeans. This view implies that the Druses sense of being wronged gives them license to utilize whatever at their disposal to break off their yoke. Djabal Hakeem, for instance, sees that he and his people are unarmed. He restores thus to the only weapon left: Faith. He leans on the Druses' simple belief in the supernatural. Yet, he is not the Machiavellian; nor is he utilitarian figure common in the Victorian fiction. Unlike these, he has a noble purpose. He is highly sensitive, moral, dreamy, and chaste (Gridely, 1973, p. 1-13):

*...worst of all,
The gaining my tribe's confidence by fraud That would
disgrace very Frank. (Act II, p. 201)*

He justifies behavior like this:

*Djabal, Youssof's child, thought slain
With the whole race, the sheikhs, this perfect
Endeavored to extripate-saved, a child,
Returns from traversing the world, a man, able to take
revenge...who gainsays?
Flasehood! Thou shalt not keep thy hold on me!
Nor even get a hold on me! This now
This day- hour- minute-'t is as here I stand On
this accused threshold of the Prefect, That I find
myself deceiving and deceived! And now what
do I?- hasten to the few Deceived, ere they
deceive the many- shout, "As I professed, I did
believe myself! Say, had you seen a butchery-
If Ayoob, Karshook, saw- Ma'ani there Must tell you
how I saw my father sink;
My mother's arms twine still about my neck; I hear my
brother shriek, here's yet the scar
Of what was meant for my own death- blow-
I walked the worlds, asked help at every hand;
Came help or no? not this and this. (Act II, p. 201)*

The bitter life in the past, the hopelessness, and quest for freedom combine to compel Djabal to use fraud in order to liberate his people. The playwright adds another reason for this mode of behavior; the negative influence of Europe on Djabal:

Ah, fool! Has Europe then so poorly tamed The Syrian blood from out thee? (Act IV, p. 210)

The playwright, here, puts the blame of deviating Djabal on Europe. Therefore, Djabal thinks of repentance before of his people. The cause itself has enough justice. It should suffice to motivate the Druses into action:

Can I repent?

*I with my Druse instinct, thwarted ever,
By my Frank policy, - and with, in turn,
My Frank brain, thwarted by my Druse heart-
While these remained in equipoise, I lived
Nothing; had either been predominant,
As Frank schemer or an Druse mystic,
I had been something; - now each has destroyed The
other- and behold, from out their crash,
A third and better nature rises up-My
mere man's nature! (p. 214)*

The emergence of this new spirit has a substantial value. It happens when the Europeans have lost their humanity. The device of juxtaposition is clearly in good use here. At the moment, Djabal seems to have lost his esteem, and the rulers seem to win the grounds, and he is elevated to become the perfectible man.

Browning is known to have come under the influence of the optimistic romantic poets, especially Shelley. The influence was in the matter as well as the manner of poetry. He inherited a romantic belief which he strengthened by faith. The belief was in man's perfectible nature. Man is far from being perfect. His world is far from being flawless. He commits mistakes and faults. Yet, his very fault will stimulate him sometimes to overcome them, gradually improve himself and his environment Djabal committed a mistake, namely fraud. Yet, this helped him surpass his faulty nature to become better: "mere men's nature," he actually surpassed human faultiness. No one can speak of himself as perfect. Being a man among beasts or tyrants equals a god among mortals:

*A man among such beasts
Was miracle enough- (p. 215)*

In the above quotation, policy, intrigue, and wicked, deviant schemes are ascribed to the "Frank." Fervency, passion, and purity are romantically and exaggeratedly ascribed to the Druses. This is a subjective and inflated misrepresentation of the Druses. How did Browning pass this judgment? He never met with a Druse at all. But, Browning, in the quotation above, thinks that the coexistence of both ethnic groups may initially look like damage to both of them. One party has to be assimilated by the other. They cannot meet. In the long run, this coexistence helps to bring about the improved human

nature, the one which is human closer to perfection. The Druse is closer to perfection than his European counterpart in the play (Woodhouse, 1965, Chapter VII).

The play as a whole suggests such a conclusion. There is a contrast between the Druse's perfectibility and the ruling classes' attitudes and imperfections. They believe in strength and power. They despise weakness. All the inhabitants of the island are oppressed, as the text of the play shows. The Druses are unarmed; they are worthy of no respect. The rulers, for fanatic reasons, are oppressive to the Druses:

*He lies- and twice he lies- and thrice he lies!
Exalt thyself, Mahound! Exalt thyself! (p. 215)*

In these words, the ruler's intolerant, hostile attitude to the Druses and Islam is clearly shown. This is in contrast and juxtaposition to the Druses. Despite their being in exile and suffering, the Druses of this community are less fanatic and less intolerant. Both Jabal and the rulers are fanatic. This makes the Druse more credible than his European counterpart. Due to his fanaticism, the European in this play is more like a hopeless case as concerns human feeling (Browning, 1973).

This fanatic attitude is not that of all Europeans, be it the attitude of the majority. Loys de Drux is an exception. He is a chivalrous knight in dealing with Djabal. De Drux represents a stage in the East-West rapport signified by enchantment and amazement on the latter's part. He at first is ready to cast off his prejudice, cast and creed for Anael's sake. When there is a chance for him to rule the Island, his rapport and attitude change. The question becomes one of benefit and interests. Although he seems unlike the rest of the rulers, he is not different from them at the end. His attitude to the Druse and the East is epitomized in his outlook to Anael. He wants her to become his property to wage war against Druses.

Anael would have accepted that absorption had her sense of different identity and affiliation not been revitalized by Djabal's calling. One of the most moving scenes in the play is that in which. She is dressed in her long-preserved Druse costume. This she puts on before getting rid of the tyrannical prefect.

4. CONCLUSIONS

From the dialog with Djabal and the rulers, it could be conjectured that a long-lasting policy had been practiced on the Druses, keeping them ignorant and unaware of the vital and hot problems around them. They are confused in their loyalties. Keeping them ignorant proves to be double-edged. Believing in the miracle in front of their eyes, and viewing the sacrifices of Djabal

and Anael, they grow conscious of all that had missed them. Unarmed, they confront the rulers and their men. Browning presents the miracles that the Druse sense of affiliation can perform in spite of all unfavorable circumstances. However, this is a baseless exaggeration far from reality.

In this play, Browning has examined the hearings of the Druse- European coexistence. The view of the rapport is that of master and slave. At best, it is a sort of masculinity versus feminine. The nobler attitude should be free from fanaticism. In the long run, ultimately and eventually, some goodwill emerge from that rapport; not because of the rapport itself- for this would tentatively sanctify this mode of human relations, which is not intended; but because of the human open-mindedness, being free from fanaticism. This rapport is only a stimulant for the communities to have a universal and a positive role model, toward ultimate perfection.

In Robert Browning's days, the cultural borders were starting to vanish. Browning's interest in the Druses can be regarded as a new perspective for industrial England to view faraway communities. Browning's plays show that the time was ripe for new themes and new conflicts represented in drama. However, the portrayal of the Druse community came weak because the poet relied on imagination and insignificant sources. Consequently, the Druse land which he explored was an inexistent territory, unlikely to contextualize in the contemporary world, but can be connected with universal themes such as alienation, isolation, and exile, which are at the heart and core of identity-centered works. Despite his apparent good intentions, Browning misrepresented the Druses by being too romantic with their image.

The culture he wished to depict in this work was beyond his direct grasp. This article presented an analysis of the play, to which very little attention was paid even by the specialists in Browning studies. The conclusion is that Browning provided for readers and the spectators a rather weak image of the Druses as individuals and as a community. They are shown to be gullible and misguided as a community. Their leadership is shown as cunning, dishonest, and Machiavellian. All this causes the failure of this tragedy as a drama.

5. REFERENCES

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