

Biographical Influences of *The Visionary*

By Kathy Dudley

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Visionary" marked his debut on the literary scene. It was influenced in part by current events of his time, by the appeal of "the arabesque" to his readers, his high regard for Lord Byron and Poe's familiarity with Byron's life. It is also probable that events and characters from Poe's own life figure in the tale, especially the death of his mother and his adoption by the Allan family.

The characters and plot of the tale resemble those of his play, *The Politian*, Poe's sole attempt at writing for the stage. The poem, untitled in the tale and later published as "To one in Paradise" makes literary references to Byron's work and, possibly, to what Byron's critics refer to as "the Byronic" in terms of imagery.

The Politian is based on a true story, reported in national newspapers, about the killing of Colonel Solomon P. Sharp of Kentucky in 1825 by Jereboam O.

Beauchamp. Sharp seduced a girl, Ann Cook, whom he refused to marry. Their child died, and Mr. Beauchamp, much younger than Ann, became romantically interested in her and asked her to marry him. She agreed, and asked Beauchamp to avenge her, who then challenged Sharp to a duel. Because he was in the wrong, Sharp refused to fight. (Mabbott. *Politian*, p. 56)

Cook and Beauchamp later married in June 1824, and the two determined that Beauchamp would kill Sharp. In 1825, Beauchamp stabbed Sharp to death. Beauchamp was convicted of the murder because the jury thought the crime was politically motivated. Like the two lovers in "The Visionary," the Beauchamps made a suicide pact. Unlike the stranger in "The Visionary," however, Mr. Beauchamp recovered, although his wife died.

Mabbott believes that Poe wrote *Politian* in 1835 (Mabbott, p. 58), but John Ingram may be correct in believing that Poe wrote parts of *Politian* in 1831¹ -- three years before "The Visionary" was published.

Another influence on the plot and characters in "The Visionary" is the life and writings of Lord Byron, whose works were widely read by Poe and who was Poe's idol. Byron found his beloved married to an older nobleman, as was Poe's female protagonist, Marchessa Aphrodite. Aphrodite is believed to be a composite of two women Byron loved, Mary Chaworth and Contessa Guiccioli. The stranger of "The Visionary," like Byron, resides in Venice, lives in a magnificent home, and becomes the lover of the younger Italian wife of an older Italian nobleman. Byron lived in Venice between 1816 and 1822, and in letters to Thomas Moore, claims that many Venetian wives had lovers of whom their husbands were aware. Count Guiccioli, however, thirty years older than his

¹ Ingram, John H. *Edgar A. Poe: His Life, Letters and Opinions* (London, 1880), p. 111.

wife, objected to Byron's relationship with the Contessa, and stole the letters that Byron had written to her. The Contessa and her father ultimately appealed to the Pope to have her marriage annulled, a petition that was granted with the understanding that Contessa Guiccioli reside at her family's estate in Ravenna. Byron first tells Moore of his love for the Contessa in a letter dated 24 December 1816, but calls her Marianna rather than Teresa, Contessa Guiccioli's first name:

[TO THOMAS MOORE *Venice, December 24, 1816*]

My flame (my *Donna* whom I spoke of in my former epistle, my Marianna) is still my Marianna, and I her - what she pleases. She is by far the prettiest woman I have seen here, and the most loveable I have met with any where - as well as one of the most singular. I believe I told you the rise and progress of our *liaison*. . . . Lest that should not have reached you, I will merely repeat, that she is a Venetian, two-and-twenty years old, married to a merchant well to do in the world. . . .

Byron's Marianna resembles the heroine of "The Visionary," but it is not reported that the Contessa ever became pregnant, although another woman, Claire Clairmont, bore Byron a child named Allegra:

He was also joined by Mary [Shelley]'s step-sister, Claire Clairmont, with whom he had had an affair in London. Byron initially refused to have anything to do with Claire, and would only agree to remain in her presence with the Shelleys, who eventually persuaded Byron to accept and provide for Allegra, the child she bore him in January 1817.²

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Byron

In addition to these similarities, in his letters to Moore, Byron described the revelry of Venice during the carnival, which is echoed in Poe's tale: "thine own Venice — which is a star-beloved city of the sea, and the wide windows of whose Paladian palaces, gleaming with the fires of midnight *revelry* [italics mine], look down with a sad and bitter meaning upon the secrets of her silent waters."

Further, the poem embedded in the tale, later published separately as "To one in Paradise," also has a probable Byronic connection. Poe, for example, uses metaphors in the last two lines of the poem, the first of which reads as follows: ". . . Shall bloom, the thunder-blasted tree . . ." Byron uses this same metaphor in *Childe Harold*, partly written in Venice, a description that Galt concludes refers to Byron's "own peculiar passion":³

His love was Passion's essence – as a tree
On fire by lightning

The last line of the poem reads "Or the stricken eagle soar," and although the connection to Byron is less distinct, the symbol may have become associated with Byron in Poe's mind. The eagle was used by Moore, Galt and Shelley to

³ Basler, R P, "Byronism in Poe's "To one in Paradise", *American Literature*, Vol 9. No. 2, May 1937, 235

symbolize Byron's pride and towering genius. Byron used this metaphor many times to describe several of his various heroes, and Poe may have considered it a "peculiarly Byronic symbol" along with the thunder-blasted tree.

According to Mabbott, there are no other sources for "The Visionary."⁴ In "The Prisoner of Chillon," however, Byron refers to a green isle and flowers in the same stanza, reminiscent of the embedded poem's first stanza, which reads " A green isle in the sea, love, / A fountain and a shrine, / All wreathed with fairy fruits and flowers ; / And all the flowers were mine. Byron's stanza contains these lines:

A small green isle, it seem'd no more,
Scarce broader than my dungeon floor,
But in it there were three tall trees,
And o'er it blew the mountain breeze,
And by it there were waters flowing,
And on it there were young flowers growing,

"The Visionary" is an arabesque tale⁵, and the setting of the story is used much in the same way that Conrad used Africa for his novella, *Heart of Darkness*: as scenery. The arabesque setting is highly stylized, ornate and resembles descriptions that occidentals may imagine about oriental artistry and décor, which are inaccurate. The arabesque setting is meant to appeal, most likely, to Poe's readership: women who read for escapism and wanted the vicarious

⁴ Ibid. 149

⁵ <http://www.usna.edu/EnglishDept/poeperplex/assign.htm>

experience of the exotic, the titillation of illicit love and the resolution of such immorality, the justice for which is the death of those guilty of such behavior.

A psychoanalytic reading of the tale points up many similarities between Poe's biography and the plot of the tale. Marie Bonaparte, a Freudian psychoanalyst, believes that many of Poe's heroines are references to his mother and possibly his step-mother, Frances Allen. Poe's mother had large eyes, and much is made of vision and eyes in the tale. The scene which takes place at the canal, when the stranger steps from the shadows and plunges into the canal to retrieve the child, implies to me that the stranger is, in fact, the child's father, rather than the Marchessa Aphrodite's husband, Mentoni. The similarity to Poe's life is that Poe had two fathers: his biological father who died when Poe was two years old, and John Allan, his foster father, who like Mentoni took possession of the child from the stranger, and was a wealthy merchant.

Bonaparte believes that Elizabeth Poe resembled Aphrodite in that she had curly black hair, pale skin and large eyes. Because of her illness, Elizabeth's pallor resembles that of a marble statue, as does Aphrodite's: "The pallor of the marble countenance, the swelling of the marble bosom, the very purity of the marble feet. . . ." Whether Poe's mother had had a lover is unknown, but she had been abandoned her husband who had married her when she was a teen-aged widow.

And like Poe's mother and his biological father, Aphrodite and the stranger – at the end of the tale – both die, leaving the child previously rescued from the canal in the custody of the wealthy merchant, just as Poe was left by his parents in the custody of the wealthy John Allan.

While the meaning of "The Visionary" may never be fully revealed, it is evident that connections exist between the tale's themes and the personal and literary experiences of two eminent men of letters.