

"THE REVOLT OF ISLAM" AS A
MEDIÉVAL ROMANCE

by

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UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE FELLOWS PROGRAM

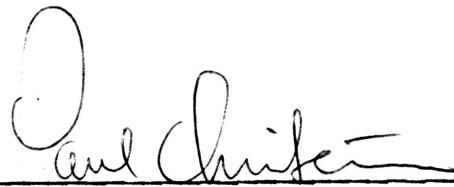
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Read and approved by

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Paul Christensen". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Dr. Paul Christensen, Supervisor

Acknowledgments

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Paul Christensen for his generous cooperation in making the study possible by acting as advisor of the project.

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Introduction

This study was primarily designed to determine whether "The Revolt of Islam" by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a Medieval Romance or not.

In the course of the study, it was found that I first had to arrive at a definition of Medieval Romance and that, following the application of such definition to the work itself, Shellyian distinctions must then be explained. This I have endeavored to do.

The value of the project is, I believe, far-reaching. This is due to the fact that, as far as I know, no extensive research has been done in this area.

The significance of the project is heightened by the fact that the poem has endured years of misunderstanding. The tie that binds the work together, the Medieval Romance genre, has been overlooked. This has caused critics to view the poem as "a bad and a disproportionate narrative".¹ Critics have complained that it is vague and "suffers on account of

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Adel Salama, Shelly's Major Poems, A Re-Interpretation, IX (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Fur Englische Sprache Und Literatur, Universitat Salzburg, 1973), p. 86.

its lack of logical sequence and its neglect of the time
factor."² These and many more of the complaints of the
critics can be quickly dispelled when one views the poem
as a Medieval Romance. It is this theory which I propose.
When "The Revolt of Islam" is viewed as a Medieval Romance
then the poem acquires a unity which it has previously
appeared to lack.

²

Salama, p. 37.

What Is Medieval Romance, the Genre?

The Medieval Romance genre is the genre of the ideal. The idealisms are represented to the reader in the form of conventions. These conventions are therefore necessary and are primary to the Medieval Romance work. There are three major types of conventions: setting, action, and characterization.¹

One major type of convention found in Medieval Romances is that of setting. Medieval Romances are usually set in remote times and places.² Rarely is a true Medieval Romance set in the present or future world. Ancient times seem to suit the form better. A Medieval Romance has a "Remember the good old days" aura to it. Another convention pertaining to the setting of a Medieval Romance is the use of exotic personal and geographical names.³ The personal names are usually rather odd, such as Tristan and Isolde, and this tends to get the reader to look at the characters in a more individualistic way. From the beginning the reader takes a double take and notices that

¹ John F. Stevens, Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1973), p. 169.

² Stevens, p. 100.

³ Stevens, p. 100.

there is something different about these characters. The author of a Medieval Romance also makes extensive use out of exotic geographical names. Sometimes they are imaginary and sometimes real, but they always draw the reader's attention to them because they are individualistic rather than ordinary.

The setting of a Medieval Romance is even further conventionalized by the details of the scene. Many of the scenes are often pictured as being "marvellous" in some way or other. In J. E. Steven's book, Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches, he lists three categories of the marvellous: the mysterious, the magical, and the miraculous. The mysterious refers to the unmotivated, unexplained marvellous. For example, talking animals, ships without helmsmen, and green knights.⁴ The magical refers to the marvellous which is controlled by man. Magic ointments, swords, rings, and potions all belong to this category.⁵ The miraculous refers to the marvellous which is controlled by God. Outside of the Holy Grail cycle, miracles are not often found in romance, unless it is to foretell the future.⁶

⁴ Stevens, p. 100.

⁵ Stevens, p. 101.

⁶ Stevens, p. 101.

The second type of convention found in Medieval Romance is that of action. Action conventions can generally be divided into three types of actions: actions concerned with plot, actions concerned with combat, and actions concerned with women.

The convention of plot action is not utilized verbatim in Medieval Romance after Medieval Romance, however, it is the basic structure from which the author may deviate. The plot action begins with the hero setting out on a quest or mission. The hero is not simply wandering.⁷ The body of the Medieval Romance is then taken up by a succession of adventures. They follow one after another, but "not through a clearly defined and located countryside, but rather in a geographical vacuum."⁸ The crisis of the Medieval Romance is an adventure "which may or may not result in actual combat."⁹ Either way, however, it is a very "meaningful encounter."¹⁰ Frequently, at some time during the plot of a Medieval Romance, the masculine and feminine characters are separated and reunited later in the romance.¹¹ In the

⁷ Stevens, p. 170.

⁸ Stevens, p. 169.

⁹ Stevens, p. 80.

¹⁰ Stevens, p. 80.

¹¹ Stevens, p. 37.

end, the hero of romance "survives and returns to the
community he belongs to."¹²

The second type of action conventions are those concerned with battles. Generally, these actions can be classified into two categories: rescuing battles and revenge battles. Battles which are fought with the intention of rescue are usually aimed at rescuing a woman,¹³ a wronged person or people,¹⁴ or the holy city. Battles which are fought for revenge usually are motivated by a violation against a woman's chastity or for a wrong committed against a good person or people.¹⁵

Actions concerned with women are the third category of conventional actions. Both positive and negative actions can be found in this category. Positively, the feminine characters are protected and/or rescued by the masculine characters.¹⁶ Negatively, the women are frequently sexually deprived and experience frustration in love.¹⁷

According to Stevens, "The sexual deprivation is often emphasized by the nature of the guard (of the woman)..."¹⁸

¹²
Stevens, p. 76.

¹³
Richard Hurd, Letters on Chivalry and Romance (New York: Garland, 1971), p. 41.

¹⁴
Hurd, p. 23.

¹⁵
Hurd, pp. 13-14.

¹⁶
Hurd, p. 41.

¹⁷
Stevens, p. 37.

¹⁸
Stevens, p. 37.

The third category of conventions found in Medieval Romances is that of characterization. There are many conventional stock characters in Medieval Romance such as the oppressive feudal Lord and his slaves;¹⁹ monsters, dragons, and serpents;²⁰ and the supernatural characters such as ghosts.²¹ These characters are rarely filled out into rounded characters, but remain shallow, yet functional. The primary characters of Medieval Romance are the hero and heroine: the primary man and woman of the story. These characters are usually more rounded than the other characters of the romance, although they are still stock characters to a certain degree. The women are fair creatures which are frequently in need of protection,²² and the men are frequently relentless, vindictive, yet courteous.²³ However, the two sexes may also enjoy other characteristics. The hero or heroine usually does not embody achieved perfection,²⁴ although he or she should be fairly close to it. They are

¹⁹
Hurd, p. 28.

²⁰
Hurd, p. 30.

²¹
Stevens, p. 100.

²²
Hurd, p. 41.

²³
Hurd, pp. 35-36.

²⁴
Stevens, p. 170.

usually also against inflicting pain onto other characters,
no matter how evil the characters might be.²⁵ Last of all,
the hero or heroine often idealizes certain human concerns,
and the concern most idealized is that of love.²⁶

²⁵ Stevens, p. 51.

²⁶ Stevens, p. 29.

Is "The Revolt of Islam" a Medieval Romance?

"The idealisms of medieval romance are not archaic oddities fished out of musty cupboards but fundamental human concerns."¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that Medieval Romance survived to the nineteenth century and that Percy Bysshe Shelley used elements of Medieval Romance to unify his poem, "The Revolt of Islam." "The spirit of Chivalry, was a fire which soon spent itself: But that of Romance, which was kindled at it, burnt long, and continued its light and heat even to the politer ages";² even to the age of the nineteenth century. It would seem very natural that a man such as Shelley, who wanted to civilize the world, should turn to Medieval Romance since "Medieval Romance was, amongst other things, a great civilizing enterprise. To quote C. S. Lewis's words about Malory: it was concerned with 'the civilization of the heart (by no means of the head), a fineness and sensitivity, a voluntary rejection of all the uglier and more vulgar

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John E. Stevens, Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1973), p. 21.

2

Richard Hurd, Letters on Chivalry and Romance (New York: Garland, 1971), pp. 3-4.

impulses."³ And it apparently was very natural for Shelley since he wrote "The Revolt of Islam" in a mere six months.⁴

As has been previously discussed, conventional settings are employed in Medieval Romances in that the romance is generally set in remote times and places, exotic personal and geographical names are used, and the details of the scene are pictured as being marvellous. "The Revolt of Islam" fits all three of the criteria for conventional romance settings.

First of all, what place could be more remote than Islam? The title of the poem has been a puzzle, but I believe that Shelley chose the land of Islam because the name is both remote, yet familiar. "Islam" brings the Arabic regions to mind, and yet the reader knows that no particular region is named so. Therefore, the reader imagines a place, but the image which he sees is a misty one---exactly the type of image required for a Medieval Romance. Several other remote areas are specifically named which enforces Shelley's conformity to this characteristic of the romance. For example, Laon is said to have grown up in Argolis which was a region of ancient Greece, in northeastern Peloponnesus,⁵

³ Stevens, p. 50.

⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Revolt of Islam" in Collected Works (London: Oxford Press, 1971), p. 36.

⁵ Shelley, II, II.

and a reference is later made to Athos by the hero as he
described a similar summit.⁶ As for the required remoteness
of time, Shelley characterized Islam as a rude, primitive
place where rebels were chained and deserted in caverns,⁷
old men lived in deserted towers,⁸ and people fought with
spears⁹ and spikes.¹⁰

It is quite simple to see that Shelley certainly
used exotic personal and geographical names. The main
characters of the poem are the hero and heroine, Laon and
Cythna, and the tyrant, Othman, and the poem is set in Greece
and Islam. One might ask why Shelley did not feel that
Dick and Jane were suitable names for his characters and why
he did not choose England as the setting for his poem. The
answer is quite simple. A Medieval Romance is concerned
with idealism and one cannot be idealistic about one's next
door neighbors. A reader is much more able to view remote
people in remote areas in an idealistic fashion than those
he is certain are ordinary.

⁶ Shelley, V, KLIH.

⁷ Shelley, III, XIII-XIV.

⁸ Shelley, IV, II.

⁹ Shelley, V, XIII.

¹⁰ Shelley, VI, XIII.

A true Medieval Romance is further conventionalized by the details of its setting. Marvellous elements must be a part of the setting. According to J. E. Stevens, there are three categories of the marvellous: the mysterious, the magical, and the miraculous. Two of these three types of the marvellous can be found in "The Revolt of Islam": the mysterious marvellous and the magical marvellous. The miraculous marvellous is clearly absent.

As previously outlined, the mysterious marvellous refers to the unmotivated, unexplained marvellous. In "The Revolt of Islam" there are numerous examples of the mysteriously marvellous and they can be classified into three areas: man as marvellous, animals as marvellous, and nature as marvellous.

Man was occasionally placed in a marvellous situation in "The Revolt." For example, following the hand-to-hand combat with the tyrant's soldiers, Laon found that he "soon survived alone."¹¹ It would seem to be quite marvellous that of all those fighting for liberty only he would survive, and then be rescued at the last minute. It would indeed be a marvellous thing. Another example may be found later in the poem when Cythna related to Laon her adventures since their separation. In describing the baby that she thought she gave birth to in the cave she told

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Shelley, VI, XVIII.

Laon that "'It was like thee, dear love, its eyes were
thine,/ Its brow, its lips...'" ¹² This was quite marvellous
since their love was only consummated after the birth of
the baby. Previous to Cythna's capture by the tyrant's
slaves, Laon had treated her as a companion and a child, but
never as a lover. Therefore, the baby's resemblance to Laon
was completely unexplainable and therefore mysteriously
marvellous.

Another area of the mysteriously marvellous found in
"The Revolt" is that which pertains to animals. Shelley
characterized three animals as marvellous: a serpent, a
horse, and a sea-eagle. The serpent is seen as a marvellous
creature at the beginning of the poem. After a strenuous
battle with an eagle, the serpent coiled up on a beautiful
woman's bosom. ¹³ The serpent's unexplainable behavior is
further emphasized by the fact that an on-looker also cannot
understand its behavior. ¹⁴ The next animal made marvellous
by Shelley is a horse. The horse was a Tartarian horse which
Cythna rode in her rescue of Laon after his fight with the
tyrant's soldiers. As Laon and Cythna escaped upon the
galloping horse "...his hoofs ground the rocks to fire and

¹² Shelley, VII, XVIII.

¹³ Shelley, I, XX.

¹⁴ Shelley, I, XXII.

dust,/ His strong sides made the torrents rise in spray,/ ¹⁵
And turbulence, as of a whirlwind's gust/ Surrounded us."

Such a horse's behavior could not possibly be explained.

The third creature characterized as mysteriously marvellous
by Shelley was a sea-eagle. While Cythna was imprisoned
in a cave "a sea-eagle brought me (Cythna) food the while." ¹⁶

Later it also came "oaring with rosy feet its silver
boat." ¹⁷ All-in-all, it was a rather marvellous sea-eagle.

The last area of the mysteriously marvellous found in
"The Revolt" is that which pertains to nature. One example
of nature as marvellous can be found in the cave in which
Cythna was imprisoned. It could only be reached by diving
into the ocean and "'through many a cavern which the eternal
flood/ Had scooped," ¹⁸ and then by following a golden
chain. Once inside the cave it was found that it had a floor
"'With the deep's wealth, coral and pearl, and sand/ Like
spangling gold, and purple shells engraven/ With mystic
legends by no mortal hand,/ Left there..." ¹⁹ It was all
completely unexplainable. Another example of nature as the
mysteriously marvellous can be found in the marble ruin to

¹⁵
Shelley, VI, XXII.

¹⁶
Shelley, VII, XIV.

¹⁷
Shelley, VII, XXVII.

¹⁸
Shelley, VII, X.

¹⁹
Shelley, VII, XIII.

which Iacon and Cythna retired to after their escape from the tyrant's soldiers. Over the roof of the ruin "Fair clinging weeds with ivy pale did grow, / ... A hanging dome of leaves, a canopy moon-proof." ²⁰ Within the ruin "A natural couch of leaves" ²¹ rested "Which seasons none disturbed." Furthermore, "flowering parasites," ²² or orchids, grew nearby. All was in perfect position and undisturbed... definitely not one's normal nature scene. In this scene everything had grown, with no cultivation or arrangement, just perfectly... an unexplainable setting. In addition, "A wandering meteor by some wild wind sent, / Hung high in the green dome." ²³ Meteors normally flash by suddenly. They rarely hang in the air long enough for one to survey one's lover by its light. And isn't it strange that the meteor went by just at that moment? Quite unexplainable, and quite mysteriously marvellous.

The magical marvellous is less frequently found than the mysteriously marvellous, yet it is present. Iacon prophesied that Cythna "'with the music of thine own sweet spells / Will disenchant the captives (of the tyrant)." ²⁴ Later in the poem, she does indeed succeed and the tyrant's slaves "'bend beneath the spell / Of that young maiden's

²⁰ Shelley, VI, XXVII.

²¹ Shelley, VI, XXVIII.

²² Shelley, VI, XXVIII.

²³ Shelley, VI, XXXII.

²⁴ Shelley, II, XLII.

speech."²⁵ Sense and Reason are also spoken of by Shelley as "'those enchanters fair,/ Whose wand of power is hope."²⁶ Shelley did not lean as heavily on the magically marvellous as he did on the mysteriously marvellous, but he did add a pinch of it here and there to spice up his recipe of romance.

As previously discussed, the second area of convention found in Medieval Romance is that of action. These conventional actions can generally be divided into three types of actions: actions concerned with plot, actions concerned with combat, and actions concerned with women. Shelley incorporated each area of these conventional actions into his poem, but gave a different emphasis to each. Conventional actions dealing with women were the least emphasized while conventional plot actions were the most emphasized.

There are several conventional actions centered on women that are often found in Medieval Romances. One is that the feminine characters are usually protected and/or rescued by the masculine characters. It is here that Shelley really deviated in a noticeable degree from the

²⁵ Shelley, IV, XX.

²⁶ Shelley, IX, XXXII.

conventional formula for Medieval Romance. Rather than continuing to enforce the passive role of women in the romance, Shelley characterized them in a much different way and, of course, the action surrounding these feminine characters adjusted accordingly. The cause of this alteration in convention will be discussed in the next chapter. Although it is certainly true that Laon attempted to protect Cythna from being kidnapped by the tyrant's soldiers and tried to effect her rescue from the tyrant by giving himself up, he failed on both attempts. However, this failure does not deteriorate the Medieval Romance form in any way because Laon's failure to protect or rescue Cythna did not affect his quest or mission. In fact, his failures appeared to aid him in his mission as in the first case she carried on his work at the Golden City and in the second case it was said that his murderers "will
repent,---/ Yes, vain and barren tears shall flow!"²⁷ and
"to his home each one returning,/ And to long ages shall
this hour be known;/ And slowly shall its memory, ever
burning,/ Fill this dark night of things with an eternal
morning."²⁸ Far from destroying their missions, Laon and

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Shelley, XII, XXXVIII.

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Shelley, XII, XXXIX.

Cythna's deaths seemed to further them by creating an image in the minds of the people which was very similar to that created by the crucifixion of Christ.

Another conventional action associated with feminine characters in Medieval Romance is that the women are sexually deprived and experience frustration in love. According to Stevens, many times the sexual deprivation of a feminine character is emphasized by her guard. In "The Revolt" Cythna was guarded by "a green and wrinkled eunuch" and "a wretch from infancy made dumb by poison."²⁹ During Cythna's imprisonment in the cave her only visitor was the sea-eagle and the dumb diver, therefore, she was completely sexually deprived during this period..

Another category of action conventions are those concerned with combat. Combatant action can generally be divided into two types: rescuing battles and revenge battles. Generally, battles fought with the intention of rescue are usually aimed at rescuing a woman, a wronged person or people, or a holy city. Battles which are fought for revenge are usually motivated by a violation against a woman's chastity or for a wrong committed against a good person or people. Shelley did a distinct thing in manipulating the combats of "The Revolt" so that "the good" people

29 Shelley, VII, VIII.

fought rescue battles and "the evil" people fought revenge battles. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Laon and Cythna were involved in several battles whose intention was rescue. Laon attempted to rescue Cythna from the tyrant's slaves by fighting them with a knife³⁰ and later Cythna rescued Laon by interceding between Laon and the tyrant's soldiers while riding the Tartarian horse.³¹ Together, they both attempted to rescue the holy city, "the City of Gold,"³² from the tyrant and his slaves: "In the high name of truth and liberty, / Around the City millions gathered were."³³ The millions had come together to rescue themselves:

"Man seeks for gold in mines, that he may weave
A lasting chain for his own slavery;--
In fear and restless care that he may live
He toils for others, who must ever be
The joyless thralls of like captivity;
He murders, for his chiefs delight in ruin;
He builds the altar, that its idol's fee
May be his very blood; he is pursuing--
O, blind and willing wretch!--his own obscure undoing."³⁴

The revenge battles were generally instigated by "the evil" characters: the tyrant and his followers. The revenge battles were, in effect, one long revenge war.

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- 30 Shelley, III, X.
31 Shelley, VI, XIX.
32 Shelley, VIII, I.
33 Shelley, IX, XII.
34 Shelley, VIII, XIV.

"We (the tyrant's followers) swear by thee (God)!
and to our oath do thou
Give sanction, from thine hell of friends and flame,
That we will kill with fire and torments slow,
The last of those who mocked thy holy name,
And scorned the sacred laws thy prophets did proclaim."³⁵

The war was not to end until the tyrant and priest's
enemies, Laon and Cythna were found and destroyed:

". . . they (the priests) said their god was waiting/To
see his enemies writhe, and burn, and bleed,--/And that,
till then, the snakes of Hell had need/ Of human souls."³⁶

As one can easily see, the battles instigated by the tyrant
and priests were battles of revenge against Laon and Cythna,
and all who had fought with them. One can also see that
the tyrant and priests used God as their motive for revenge.
However, God was not their real motive, as is shown in
the characterization of an Iberian Priest:

". . . in his breast
Did hate and guile lie watchful, intertwined.
Twin serpents in one deep and winding nest;
He loathed all faith beside his own, and pined
To wreak his fear of Heaven in vengeance on mankind."³⁷

Therefore, Shelley characterized religion as an evil
institution which breeds evilness in the men close to it.
This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Plot actions are the third type of action conventions
often found in Medieval Romances. Conventionalized plot

35 Shelley, X, XXIX

36 Shelley, X, XLV.

37 Shelley, X, XXXII.

actions are the basic structure from which the romantic author deviates.

One such plot action is that the hero sets out on a quest or mission, and not just a rambling journey which is without purpose. In "The Revolt," Shelley first established the existence of a need for a quest by describing man's situation: "This vital world . . . / Was as a dungeon to my (Laon's) blasted kind."³⁸ Laon mourned the fact that "all pined in bondage; body and soul, / Tyrant and slave, victim and torturer"³⁹ and he finally established the necessity of the quest by saying that "This slavery must be broken. . ."⁴⁰ Thus the quest was established.

Next, Laon can be seen taking up the quest: "It (slavery) shall be no more! . . . / Justice and Truth their winged child (Laon) have found."⁴¹ He decided to "arise and waken / The multitude."⁴² His dedication to his quest was emphasized by his remarking that "ever from that hour upon me lay / The burden of this hope. . ."⁴³ The heroine, Cythna, likewise took up the quest of liberating mankind when she offered "to wreak / Ruin upon the tyrants" at⁴⁴

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- 38 Shelley, II, VI.
39 Shelley, II, VIII.
40 Shelley, II, XXXVII.
41 Shelley, II, XII.
42 Shelley, II, XIV.
43 Shelley, II, XV.
44 Shelley, II, XXXIX.

Laon's command. Cythna's dedication to the quest can best be illustrated by her reaction to being kidnaped by the tyrant's slaves. As she lay bound on the ground, smiling, she told Laon:

"These bloody men are but the slaves who bear
Their mistress to her task--it was my scope
The slavery where they drag me now, to share,
And among captives willing chains to wear⁴⁵
Awhile--the rest thou (Laon) knowest--."

Furthermore, Cythna emphasized the importance of liberating the woman because "Can man be free if woman be a slave?"⁴⁶ She therefore took on the special task of liberating women: ". . . where'er in abjectness/Woman with some vile slave her tyrant dwells./ There with the music of thine (Laon's) own sweet spells/ Will (I, Cythna) disenchant the captives."⁴⁷ Consequently, both the hero and heroine set out on a quest and were not merely rambling through the length of the poem.

Another conventional plot action is the characteristic way in which the body of the romance is taken up by a succession of adventures which follow one after another, but "not through a clearly defined and located countryside, but in a geographical vacuum." This is quite true of "The Revolt of Islam." When the observer traveled with the

45 Shelley, III, IX.

46 Shelley, II, XLIII.

47 Shelley, II, XLII.

woman to the Temple their exact pathway was not described.

It was merely stated that ". . . and now/We are embarked. . ." ⁴⁸

and that "...as we sailed, a strange and awful tale/That
Woman told..." ⁴⁹ Another example can be found in the

description of the movement of Laon to the Hermit's home:

"...over the salt sea-billow/ I sailed..." ⁵⁰ When Laon

left the Hermit to go to the Golden City he traveled "O'er
many a mountain...o'er many a dale and many a moor..." ⁵¹

which gave a feeling of extensive travel, but the reader
still did not know exactly what the area was like. Another
example can be found in the retreat of Laon and Cythna

following the triumph of the tyrant's men. The two "fled/
Over the plain" ⁵² until they came to "A rocky hill which

overhung the Ocean..." ⁵³ thus the reader knows that the
two have fled from the tyrant to a hill but he does not

know how far away the hill is from the tyrant or exactly
what lies between the tyrant and Laon and Cythna, therefore
the illusion of a geographical vacuum is created.

48 Shelley, I, KXIII.

49 Shelley, I, KXIV.

50 Shelley, III, KXXI.

51 Shelley, III, KXXI.

52 Shelley, VI, KXI.

53 Shelley, VI, KXIII.

Another plot action convention can be found in the typical crisis of a Medieval Romance. The crisis is a meaningful encounter which may or may not be a battle. In "The Revolt of Islam" the crisis is found in the uprising of the tyrant's soldiers and their eventual triumph over Laon and his liberty fighters. It is a very meaningful encounter in that it settles the question of Liberty versus Slavery, at least for another few years and it places Laon and Cythna's lives in jeopardy.

Another plot action convention lies in the usual separation and reunion of the leading characters. Laon and Cythna also experience this. First, they are separated by the tyrant's slaves and later reunited in the Camp near the Golden City. And secondly, Laon separates himself from Cythna in his attempt to sacrifice himself to the tyrant and priests in exchange for Cythna's freedom, but Cythna reunited them by arriving on horseback.

One other plot action convention frequently found in Medieval Romances is that the hero "survives and returns to the community he belongs to." In the case of "The Revolt" there was a hero and heroine, however, both survive and enter the "Temple of the Spirit"⁵⁴ which is in effect their haven or true home.

54 Shelley, XII, XII.

The third, and last, category of conventions found in Medieval Romances is that of characterization. The two major types of characters are the stock characters and the heroes and heroines.

There is quite a variety of stock characters: the oppressive feudal Lord, the slave, the monster, the dragon, the serpent, the ghost, and several others. Shelley drew quite a few of his characters for "The Revolt of Islam" from this vat of convention. The "tyrants of the Golden City"⁵⁵ represented the oppressive lords of feudal times. The stock slaves can be found throughout the world: "...slaves who loathed their state."⁵⁶ Shelley added a new twist to the romance, however, when he began to personify emotions and actions into stock characters. For example, "'His (Evil's) spirit is their (Fear, Hatred, Faith, and Tyranny's) power, and they his slaves..."⁵⁷ War was also personified as the slave of hate and pain: "... O War! of hate and pain/ Thou loathed slave."⁵⁸ Monsters can also be found in "The Revolt." In Laon's dream "the gaping earth then vomited/ Legions of foul and ghastly shapes, which hung/ Upon my flight..."⁵⁹ Shelley also personified Hate

55 Shelley, IV, XIV.

56 Shelley, II, III.

57 Shelley, I, XXX

58 Shelley, VI, XVII.

59 Shelley, III, V.

into a monster:

"...late--that shapeless, fiendly thing
Of many names, all evil, some divine,
Whom self-contempt arms with a mortal sting;
Which, when the heart its snaky folds entwine
Is wasted quite, and when it doth repine,
To gorge such bitter prey..."⁶⁰

Shelley also described stock characters in terms of other stock characters as can be seen by his description of the tyrant as a monster: "The Tyrant peoples dungeons with his prey..."⁶¹ Dragons may not be found in "The Revolt" but an allusion to dragons exist in that "Faith, and Custon, and low-thoughted cares,/ Like thunder-stricken dragons, for a space/
left the torn human heart, their food and dwelling place."⁶²

A serpent exists in the beginning of the poem: "An Eagle and a Serpent wreathed in fight,"⁶³ and ghosts are alluded to by the Captain of the ship which rescued Cythna: "Alas! alas! I fear we are pursued/
By wicked ghosts."⁶⁴ Thus many of the stock characters frequently found in Medieval Romances can be found in "The Revolt of Islam."

The primary characters of a Medieval Romance were the hero and heroine of the work. The women were usually

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Shelley, VIII, XXI.

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Shelley, IX, XXIV.

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Shelley, Dedication, XIII.

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Shelley, I, VIII.

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Shelley, VIII, II.

characterized as fair creatures in need of protection while the men were characterized as relentless and vindictive, yet courteous. Shelley characterized Cythna as a fair creature: "she (Cythna) was known/ To be thus fair, by the few lines alone/ Which through her floating locks and gathered cloak,/Glances of soul-dissolving glory, shone."⁶⁵ Shelley also placed her in situations in which she was found to be in need of protection, for example, her abduction by the tyrant's slaves. Laon is characterized more by his courtesy than by his passion, however, he sometimes degenerated into the relentless feudal man as when he stabbed three or four slaves in his efforts to free Cythna. However, he was never vindictive. This deficiency will be discussed in the next chapter.

There are many other characteristics which are frequently enjoyed by the hero of a Medieval Romance. One is that the hero or heroine does not usually embody achieved perfection, although he or she should be fairly close to being perfect. In "The Revolt", Laon is portrayed as being quite close to perfection, but he does have his moments of imperfection, such as the time he slew three or four slaves in his attempt to rescue Cythna. In doing so, he violated his belief that "...to avenge misdeed/

⁶⁵ Shelley, I, IX.

On the misdoer, doth but misery feed/ With her broken
heart!"⁶⁶ Cythna's imperfection was shown in her separation from Laon at the beginning of the eleventh canto. She seems to have escaped from reality to the world that existed within her mind, where Freedom and Love could truly exist. This lack of strength on Cythna's part induced Laon to proceed to desperate measures in order to insure her safety. Therefore, Laon and Cythna were very nearly perfect but they did at times show their slight imperfections through their actions.

The hero and heroine of Medieval Romance are also frequently found to be against the infliction of pain. This is clearly found to be true in the case of Laon and Cythna. The Hermit first voiced their views on the subject when he told Laon that "'Perchance blood need not flow, if thou at length/Wouldst rise, perchance the very slaves would spare/⁶⁷ Their brethren and themselves.'" He went on to voice the opinion that "'If blood be shed, 'tis but a change and choice/⁶⁸ Of bonds,--from slavery to cowardice/A wretched fall!'" In the next canto Laon put his belief into action. When a newly freed slave attempted to spear his foe, Laon stepped in front of the spear and took the

66 Shelley, V, XI.

67 Shelley, IV, XVII.

68 Shelley, IV, XXVIII.

injury himself rather than have it harm an enemy. He then asked "'Ch, wherefore should ill ever flow from ill,/And pain still keener pain for ever breed?/ We are all brethren--" ⁶⁹ and went on to proclaim that "to avenge misdeed/ On the misdoer, dothbut Misery feed/ With her own broken heart!" ⁷⁰ Cythna supported the beliefs of Laon and it is enough to point out that she desired "'by most resembling thee (Laon),/ So to become most good and great and free.'" ⁷¹

Last of all, the hero and heroine often idealize certain human concerns, the most frequent of which is love. This is by far the strongest argument in favor of "The Revolt of Islam" as a Medieval Romance because there are very few works which idealize love as lavishly as Shelley did through the characters of Laon and Cythna in "The Revolt." To Laon and Cythna, love was many things: divine, enlightening, a source of bravery, an inspiration of hope, and a saving influence.

Love was idealized as being divine in "The Revolt" through description and its apparent immortality. The eyes of the woman on the beach sent out "a kindling beam/ of love divine." ⁷² Also love, along with wisdom, was described as being "the slaves of thee (divine Equality),

69 Shelley, V, XI.

70 Shelley, V, XI.

71 Shelley, II, XL.

72 Shelley, I, XXIV.

The Angels of thy sway."⁷³ Love was also idealized as being divine through its apparent immortality. Laon and Cythna's love "Immortally must live, and burn and move, / When we shall be no more."⁷⁴ Another example of love's immortality is a very direct one in that Laon once stated that "' if aught survive, I deem/ It must be love and joy, for they immortal seen."⁷⁵

Love was also idealized as being a source of enlightenment by Laon and Cythna. Their view of love as enlightening was first expressed by the woman on the beach in the first canto when she stated that "from its (the Morning Star's) beams deep love my spirit drank/... The beams of that one star did shoot and quiver/ Through my benighted mind--and were extinguished never."⁷⁶ Laon repeated this idea when he spoke of love having "nursed us in the haunts/ Where knowledge enchants/ Young hearts."⁷⁷ Cythna later remarked that "'Love when Wisdom fails makes Cythna wise.'"⁷⁸

73 Shelley, V, LI.

74 Shelley, IX, XXX.

75 Shelley, XI, XVII.

76 Shelley, I, XLI.

77 Shelley, VI, XLI.

78 Shelley, IX, XXXIV.

Laon and Cythna also believed that love was a source of bravery. Their belief was first voiced by the Hermit. He told Laon that "fearless love...succeeds/ To faiths which long have held the world in awe."⁷⁹ Later, when physical war broke out between the newly freed slaves and the tyrant's soldiers, Laon saw that "the line/ Of war extended, to our rallying cry/ As myriads flocked in love and brotherhood to die."⁸⁰

Laon and Cythna also believed that love inspired hope. In Canto IV, Laon noted that "'As night and day those ruthless bands around,/ The watch of love is kept:--a trance which awes/ The thoughts of men with hope--.'⁸¹" Later in the poem, in Cythna's speech to the slaves on the ship, she pointed out that "Thou (the Captain of the ship) art grown old/ But Hope will make thee young, for Hope and Youth/ Are children of one mother, even Love--."⁸²

Love was also idealized as a saving influence by Laon and Cythna. The Hermit voiced their view when he told Laon that "'The tyrant's guards resistance yet maintain:/ ...--the multitude/ Surround them, with words of human love,/ Seek from their own decay their stubborn minds to

79 Shelly, IV, XV.

80 Shelly, VI, K.

81 Shelly, IV, XXVII.

82 Shelly, VIII, XXVII.

move."⁸³ Laon later noted that "Those bloody bands (the newly freed slaves).../ Were ...by the contrition/ of anger turned to love, from ill beguiled."⁸⁴ Cythna voiced her belief in love's saving influence when she told the sailors on the ship that "'love and joy can make the foulest breast/ A paradise of flowers, where peace might build her nest."⁸⁵

It is not surprising that Shelley attributed the many idealistic qualities to love that he did considering the strength which he felt the emotion to have. He felt that "'love, which none may bind'"⁸⁶ could overcome all baser emotions because 'love yet flowed when faith had choked all other.'⁸⁷

It is very clear that "The Revolt of Islam" is indeed a Medieval Romance. It utilizes all of the major Medieval Romance conventions, and most of the minor ones. Those conventions that cannot be found in "The Revolt," or that have been slightly altered within the poem, were not altered or omitted due to a lack in Shelley, but rather as a matter of principle, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

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Shelley, IV, XXVI.

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Shelley, V, XVII.

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Shelley, VIII, XXII.

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Shelley, VIII, XVI.

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Shelley, VIII, XXXI.

Nineteenth Century Influence on
"The Revolt of Islam"

Shelley very definitely fit into the age in which he lived. The first half of the nineteenth century was a time when the seeds of revolution and reform were germinating in the various soils of Europe. Shelley identified with those sproutings. The French Revolution and many of the philosophies connected with it had a profound effect on Shelley and, therefore, on his literature. The French Revolution had become a strong influence in English life, which thereby enhanced its effect on Shelley through its permeation of his immediate environment. Moreover, English life in the nineteenth century, viewed from the eyes of one influenced by the revolution, also affected the poet. These influences may be easily located within his poem, "The Revolt of Islam".

The French Revolution attempted to replace the old social order with a new one; to replace feudalism with a democracy in which freedom was available to all men and where equality was established between men. Previous to the French Revolution "The normal man of the old order recognized two higher powers: first, kings, who, ruling by divine right directed the political and material affairs of men; and second, priests, who, selected by the will of heaven, assumed control over the spiritual and religious

interests of men."¹ This was to be altered by the French Revolution.

There were three major French philosophers which promoted the Revolution: Helvetius, Holbach, and Rousseau. Their philosophies were similar in spirit and attack in that all criticized the roles of king and priest, monarchy and religion. Helvetius proposed that "the stupid veneration for ancient laws and customs, the worship of tradition, must be destroyed...behind these inert rocks of tradition there are more active forces of conservatism. These are kings and priests; the first, ambitious tyrants who play upon the ignorance and weakness of mankind, and who, possessing power, maintain themselves by brute force; the second, fanatical hypocrites who play upon the superstitions and fears of men, and who threaten and persecute any one bringing forth new truth. These kings and priests are the real enemies of mankind, and they must be destroyed."² Holbach advanced the idea that "Supernatural religion, threats of an avenging deity, fears of hell, these are the whips and scorpions by which men are lashed into obedience and submission...Tyranny is founded upon supernatural religion."³

¹ Albert Elmer Hancock, The French Revolution and The English Poets (New York: Kennikat Press, 1967), p. 4.

² Hancock, p. 13.

³ Hancock, p. 16.

Rousseau, on the other hand, while agreeing with Helvetius and Holbach concerning the proper targets for criticism, he suggested that "'As long as men undertook only such works as a single person could finish, and confined themselves to such acts as did not require the joint endeavors of several hands, they lived free, healthy, honest, and happy.'" ⁴

Rousseau believed that "'The bonds of servitude are formed by the mutual dependence of man upon man.' To make a slave of any one you must make him dependent, otherwise he will escape." ⁵ Furthermore, Rousseau believed that "Man is born naturally good; he is sent into the world with no innate depravity. It is evil education which makes him bad; it is degenerate society which corrupts him. Remove from him all evil influences, and by the force of his inborn impulses he will press onward toward perfection." ⁶ Therefore, whereas Helvetius and Holbach proposed the destruction of kings and priests, Rousseau proposed the education of man towards being a more independent being and thereby a more perfectable being.

Shelley was very familiar with the French philosophers. "Before 1813 he had read Condorcet, Helvetius, Holbach, Rousseau, and a more popular writer, Volney." ⁷ However,

⁴
Hancock, p. 21.

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Hancock, pp. 21-22.

⁶
Hancock, p. 28.

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Hancock, p. 54.

Shelley was not only familiar with them, he was deeply influenced by them. The influence is so profound in "The Revolt of Islam" that France is even mentioned within the poem itself. In fact, the poem begins with the words "When the last hope of trampled France had failed..."⁸ therefore immediately establishing the fact that "The Revolt of Islam" was written as a reaction to the Revolution and what had immediately followed it. Later in the first canto Shelley wrote that "great France sprang forth, / And seized, as if to break, the ponderous chains / Which bind in woe the nations of the earth"⁹ which established the purpose of the French Revolution and which also established the necessity of still accomplishing the objective of that purpose.

It was Shelley's intense interest in the French Revolution which prompted some of the alterations concerning the conventions of Medieval Romance which he made in "The Revolt of Islam". An example is the way he had the good characters fight rescue battles and the evil characters fight revenge battles. Revenge had come to be viewed in England as an evil thing rather than as the honorable thing it had been in the twelfth century. Therefore, in order to purify

⁸
Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Revolt of Islam" in Collected Works (London: Oxford Press, 1971), Canto I, Stanza I.

⁹
Shelley, I, XXXIII.

the revolution of Islam; in order to show its nonmaliciousness, Shelley amended the convention. In Shelley's Preface to "The Revolt" he stated that "It has ceased to be believed that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries (the French) were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquillity of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened." ¹⁰ Therefore, one of Shelley's points in writing "The Revolt" was to show that a revolution could occur without a display of revenge. Since the convention violated a point of the work, the convention was simply altered in order to support the point. The same reasoning can be applied to Shelley's alteration of the vindictive hero characteristic. A vengeful hero would not have supported Shelley's proposed image of an ideal revolution, therefore, it was merely dispensed with.

Shelley agreed with Helvetius and Holbach in that monarchy and religion were the twin tyrannies to which men were servile. Shelley established that it was "Fear, Hatred, Faith and Tyranny who spread/ Those subtle nets which snare the living and the dead." ¹¹ He frequently linked the two tyrannies together in his verse. "...Opinion is more frail/ Than yon dim cloud now fading on the moon/

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Shelley, p. 33.

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Shelley, I, XXXI.

Even while we gaze, though it awhile avail/ To hide the orb
of truth---and every throne/ Of Earth and Heaven though
shadow rests thereon..."¹² Therefore, Shelley was equally
vehement in criticizing both rule and religion. Shelley
felt that divine rule and religion were both "'lies'" which
kings and priests "'didst frame for mysteries/ To blind
your slaves"'.¹³ Religion controlled the people through fear
and kings used the emotion of lust to rule the people:
"...fear with lust/ Strange fellowship through mutual hate
had tied/...which on the paths of men their mingling poison
thrust."¹⁴

However, although Shelley was against monarchy, he
felt much more compassion and understanding for kings than
for priests. Othman, the tyrant, was portrayed as a "poor
lonely man"¹⁵ after his fall from power, whereas the priests
were portrayed as being evil at all times. Shelley believed
that "The God of the priests had entrapped Adam into sin,
and had then punished him for it. Slaves had built massive
temples; priests had instituted bloody persecutions and
fomented religious wars. God appeared as a vengeful being,
choosing to save his Elect, but ready to condemn the mass

¹² Shelley, VIII, IX.

¹³ Shelley, XI, XVI.

¹⁴ Shelley, II, IV.

¹⁵ Shelley, V, XXXIII.

of mankind to perdition. If this was the God of history,
it could not be Shelley's God."¹⁶ Shelley's hatred of
supernatural religion can be easily seen in "The Revolt of
Islam", and it was this feeling that caused Shelley to alter
the Medieval Romance convention where religion was viewed as
good. God was described as "'a vain idol wrought/ Cut of the
fears and hate which vain desires have brought.'"¹⁷ The
churches were described as buildings where "All symbols of
things evil, all divine;/ And hymns of blood and mockery,
which rent/ The air from all its fanes, did intertwine/
Imposture's impious toils round each discordant shrine."¹⁸
The people's response to God, in their time of need was
"Greatest and best, be merciful again!/ Have we not stabbed
thine enemies, and made/ The Earth an altar, and the
Heavens a fane,/ Where thou wert worshipped with their
blood, and laid/ Those hearts in dust which would thy
searchless works have weighed?"¹⁹ Hence, God was properly
portrayed by Shelley as the vengeful illusion which he and
the French philosophers believed him to be. The illusionary
properties of supernatural religion can be identified in

¹⁶

R. W. Harris, Romanticism and the Social Order
1780-1830 (Great Britain: Barnes and Noble, 1969), p. 293.

¹⁷

Shelley, XI, XVI.

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Shelley, II, VII.

¹⁹

Shelley, X, XXVIII.

the stanza in which Shelley describes the slaves as each
"To his own Idol lifts his supplications vain."²⁰ The
extreme evilness of supernatural religion was person-
ified in the being of an Iberian priest by Shelley. In
the priest's breast "Did hate and guile lie watchful,
intertwined,/ Twin serpents in one deep and winding nest;/
He loathed all faith beside his own, and pined/ To wreak
his fear of Heaven in vengeance on mankind."²¹ In other
words, the lack of religious tolerance characteristic of the
century was personified in the priest. Shelley went on to
say that the priest "loathed and hated the clear light/ Of
wisdom and free thought, and more did fear,/ Lest, kindled
once, its beams might pierce the night,/ Even where his
Idol stood."²² Tones of Helvetius can be found in this
characteristic of the priest in that the ignorance of mankind
was maintained in order that the priest might continue in
power. Another example of this can be found in "The
darkness (ignorance) lingering o'er the dawn of things,/
Was Evil's breath and life."²³ Last of all, the priest's
voice "was like a blast that burst the portal/ Of fabled
hell; and as he spake, each one/ Saw gape beneath the chasms

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Shelley, X, XXVI.

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Shelley, X, XXXII.

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Shelley, X, XXXIII.

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Shelley, I, XXVIII.

of fire immortal,/ And Heaven above seemed cloven,/...fear
killed in every breast/ All natural pity then..."²⁴ Here,
Holbach's idea, that "threats of an avenging deity" and
"fears of hell" are the properties of submission, is
verified in "The Revolt". All in all, Shelley dealt very
strictly with religion in "The Revolt" and he pretty well
followed each detail previously set down by the French
philosophers concerning the subject.

Rousseau's principle of dependence versus independence
can also be found in "The Revolt of Islam". The principle
was first mentioned in the first canto where it is viewed
that when Good battles Evil then "earth's immense and trampled
multitude/ In hope on their own powers began to look"²⁵,
thereby showing that dependence on oneself was to be the
first step to freedom from tyranny. Rousseau believed that
it was lust and materialism which kings used to control the
masses. In "The Revolt", Laon and Cythna mourned that men
were "Victims of lust and hate, the slaves of slaves,"
She (Cythna) mourned that grace and power were thrown as
food to the hyaena lust."²⁶ It was later observed that

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Shelley, X, XL.

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Shelley, I, XXXI.

²⁶

Shelley, II, XXXVI.

"...in its palaces/ Sits Lust alone, while o'er the land
is borne/ Her voice, whose awful sweetness doth repress/
All evil, and her foes relenting turn."²⁷ The role of
gold, or materialism, in the maintenance of slavery was
also described in "The Revolt". After the liberation of the
people it was said that "even from gold the dreadful strength
was gone,/ Which once, made all things subject to his
(the tyrant's) power---."²⁸ With freedom came the death
of materialism because "'gold was as a god whose faith
began/ To fade, so that its worshippers were few..."²⁹
Therefore, once the bonds of slavery were broken so also
were the bonds of dependence.

Rousseau's principle of perfectability can also be
found in "The Revolt". Rousseau believed that "man is born
naturally good" and Shelley fully agreed with him. Shelley
believed man to be a noble creature perverted by lust and
ignorance. He believed that in the distant past man was
perfect and that "Such man has been, and such may yet
become!/ Ah, wiser, greater, gentler..."³⁰ As far as

²⁷ Shelley, IV, XXII.

²⁸ Shelley, V, XXVIII.

²⁹ Shelley, IX, XVIII.

³⁰ Shelley, II, XII.

Shelley was concerned, men might free themselves: "'This (slavery) need not be; ye might arise, and will that gold should lose its power, and thrones their glory;/ That love, which none may bind, be free to till/ The world, like light..."³¹ Shelley believed that "the future is thine own;/ And love and joy can make the foulest breast/ A paradise of flowers, where peace might build her nest."³² Furthermore, Shelley proposed that slavery is a learned institution in that "from our (the people's) childhood have we learned to steep/ The bread of slavery in the tears of woe."³³ Therefore, man was not the tainted creature that monarchy and religion made him out to be, but rather is the pure creature which monarchy and religion contaminate.

Another revolutionary idea found in "The Revolt" which was previously proposed by the French philosophers is that of the necessity of destroying Custom, i.e. laws and traditions. Shelley felt that "the mortal chain of Custom"³⁴ must be broken if truth was to prevail for "in each bosom of the multitude/ Justice and truth with Custom's hydra brood/ Wage silent war."³⁵ Shelley felt that "Traditions

³¹ Shelley, VIII, XVI.

³² Shelley, VIII, XXII.

³³ Shelley, VIII, XXIII.

³⁴ Shelley, Dedication, VII.

³⁵ Shelley, I, XXVIII.

dark and old, whence evil creeds/ Start forth, and whose
 dim shade a stream of poison feeds"³⁶ were the source of
 power for the kings and priests and that "deliverance/ From
 our ancestral chains"³⁷ must occur if truth was to flourish
 and freedom was to become a reality. Laws became untouchable
 through fear of Custom because it was believed that death
 would result "On all who scorn its laws."³⁸ Therefore, law
 was seen as "ruthless law"³⁹ in the way in which it prevented
 freedom and liberty from coming into existence. Therefore,
 as Shelley and the French philosophers pointed out, Custom
 must be destroyed if progress was to be made.

One more principle found in "The Revolt" can be traced
 to French Revolutionary origins: the idea of equality of
 all men. Once freedom was achieved, it was believed that a
 spirit of brotherhood would prevail because "wherefore
 should ill ever flow from ill,/ And pain still keener pain
 for ever breed?/ We are all brethren."⁴⁰ Shelley felt
 that then all men would join "'hands and hearts, and let the
 past/ Be as a grave which gives not up its dead/ To evil
 thoughts."⁴¹ At that time "those fraternal bands"⁴² would

³⁶ Shelley, II, II.
³⁷ Shelley, IV, XVI.
³⁸ Shelley, VIII, VI.
³⁹ Shelley, XII, IV.
⁴⁰ Shelley, V, XI.
⁴¹ Shelley, V, XII.
⁴² Shelley, V, XIII.

be reconciled. Thus, equality and brotherhood would be restored to mankind and peace would follow.

As Shelley apparently applied many of the dogmas and beliefs of the revolutionary French philosophers to his poem, "The Revolt of Islam", it is safe to say that he was definitely influenced by them. It should be pointed out, however, that Shelley did not take up the principles of the French Revolution simply because they were in vogue among the poets. Rather, conditions in England called for revolutionary reform on their own grounds. The inclosure movement had deprived much of the lower class masses of the use of land. Fuel was scarce. Food prices were soaring due to bad harvests prior to 1815. Not only were the poor of England enduring hardship, but they were also unrepresented. There had been very few changes made in the representation of England and Wales since the times of Charles II.⁴³ However, the existence of the French Revolution made reform appear dangerous. In Shelley's day, reform was needed but was held up by fear. Thus political reforms were stalled. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution was entering its infancy and reform became more and more essential. Shelley, realizing the situation of England, sought to appeal to the emotions of the English by his poem "The Revolt of Islam." He wrote it in the form of a romance because Helvetius had

⁴³
R. L. Woodward, The Age of Reform 1815-1870
(London: Oxford Press, 1939), pp. 1-45.

once written that "The populace prefer a romance to the
philosophy of Locke."⁴⁴ He wrote the poem "in the view of
kindling within the bosoms of my readers a virtuous enthusiasm
for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and
hope in something good, which neither violence nor
misrepresentation nor prejudice can ever totally extinguish
among mankind."⁴⁵ Therefore, specific political reforms were
disregarded by Shelley because his goal was to inspire the
spirit of liberty in his readers.

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Shelley, Preface, p. 32.

Biographical Influence on
"The Revolt of Islam"

As has been pointed out earlier in this paper, Shelley deviated from the conventional formula of romance in a noticeable degree in his treatment of the heroine. Rather than characterizing her as a passive, dependent being he characterized her as an equal, independent being. The causes of this alteration in convention can easily be found in the life of Shelley.

First of all, Shelley grew up with four sisters and his cousin, Harriet Grove. The sisters were his disciples but "His dearest and most faithful disciples were Elizabeth his eldest sister, and his lovely cousin, Harriet Grove. These three children were drawn together by their dawning senses and their impassioned love of Truth." ¹ He preached his beliefs to the girls and they drank them up. He preached that the world was divided into two sides: "On the one side Vice: kings, priests, and the rich. On the other side Virtue: philosophers, the wretched, and the poor. Here, religion in the service of tyranny: there, Godwin and his Political Justice. But more often he spoke to the girls of Love." ² To Shelley, the girls were his disciples, and he

¹ Andre Maurois, Ariel, The Life of Shelley (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), p. 13.

² Maurois, p. 14.

loved them: Elizabeth as his sister and Harriet as his lover. "...conscious of the warm loveliness of his cousin (Harriet), who trembled and vibrated beneath his touch, he felt himself filled with new courage for a life of apostle-ship and combat."³ Together, the three worked on Zastrozzi, a romance.

As time went by, the girls grew out of his radical ideas and re-entered the conventional world. Shelley, however, met Miss Hitchener and Harriet Westbrook at about this time, so his old disciples were replaced with new ones. Miss Hitchener became "his soul's sister"⁴ and he fell in love with Harriet. "Shelley had little admiration for knight Errantry, which struck him as senseless. A man has no right to devote to Woman a life which should be consecrated to the service of Humanity."⁵ However, Shelley played the role of knight when he rescued Harriet from being "cruelly perse-⁶cuted" at home. The three got along quite well until Miss Hitchener came for a lengthy visit. "Shelley himself saw the dream dissolve, revealing grosser forms, and was surprised to find installed at his side a mediocre and

³ Maurois, p. 16.

⁴ Maurois, p. 58.

⁵ Maurois, pp. 62-63.

⁶ Maurois, p. 61.

twaddling woman (Miss Hitchener). He sought his heroine in vain..."⁷ She was soon nicknamed by Shelley and Harriet as the Brown Demon.

Not long afterwards, Shelley also lost Harriet as a disciple. "A curious change came over her after Ianthe's (their daughter's) birth. It seemed as though she wished to make up nine months' inactivity. Her Latin lessons were not resumed. She wanted nothing now but to be out of doors looking into the bonnet-shops and jewellers' windows. To find pleasure in such idle trifling seemed to Shelley monstrous and unintelligible."⁸ They quickly grew apart because Harriet had never perfectly realized his ideal of Woman. "...he had hoped to find in her the delightful blend of beauty and intelligence that he would so greatly have loved, but poor Harriet had not withstood the difficult test of time."⁹

Fortunately, Shelley discovered a new disciple: Mary Wolstonecraft Godwin, a girl as intelligent as she was beautiful. "They shared the same tastes, and both looked

⁷ Maurois, p. 112.

⁸ Maurois, pp. 135-136.

⁹ Maurois, p. 149.

upon Life as an opportunity for learning prolonged into old age. They read the same books and often aloud. She went with him in his visits to his lawyers, or sheriff's officers... Under his direction, she set herself to learn Latin and even Greek. More cultured than Harriet, she did not see in these studies, as did the first Mrs. Shelley, a rather boring game, but an extension of her enjoyment."¹⁰

It was in this state of relief at having finally found his ideal that Shelley wrote "The Revolt of Islam". Therefore, it is no wonder that the heroine is characterized as an equal, independent being rather than as a passive, dependent one. The romance was a form of ideal conditions and states and, therefore, it should come as no surprise that Shelley incorporated his view of the ideal woman into it.

Conclusion

It was inevitable that Shelley should have written a romance. Helvetius had once written that "The populace prefer a romance to the philosophy of Locke"¹ and Shelley was very definitely trying to reach as many people as possible with his idea of an ideal revolution. The poem, to Shelley, was "an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives"² and for it to be a valid experiment it was necessary that many people read it.

It was not a valid experiment because the work was not read by enough people. In trying to reach the people Shelley had over-reached them and entered an area far above their heads. His romance, "The Revolt of Islam", was too much of an ideal twelfth century romance to be easily recognized as a romance by the nineteenth century. Romance by that time had degenerated into sentimentalism.

"The Revolt of Islam" is, however, an extremely successful literary work. In reviving a twelfth century

¹
Albert Elmer Hancock, The French Revolution and The English Poets (New York: Kennikat Press, 1967), p. 12.

²
Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Revolt of Islam" in Collected Works (London: Oxford Press, 1971), Preface, p. 32.

form in a nineteenth century fashion, Shelley proved that the form was not a useless form and that it could be made to be quite serviceable and interesting. It was not Shelley who failed. It was his reading public who failed.

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