

BYRON AND SCHUMANN : POSSIBLE SOURCES OF BROWNING'S 'SAUL'

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This is only another attempt to trace the origin of Browning's poem 'Saul'. Far-fetched as the new assumption may seem, it is very likely that Schumann's setting of Byron's poem 'Jephtah's Daughter' may have inspired 'Saul'. One cannot help wondering to what extent Browning has drawn upon the *Hebrew Melodies*, not only with regard to structure but also to subject matter. In addition to 'Jephtah's Daughter', I refer particularly to 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' and to 'Song of Saul Before His Last Battle'. The link between these poems and 'Saul' lies in the use of anapaestic metre. There is also an affinity in thematic substance which arouses an awareness of the similarity between these poems.

Before going any further, however, it would be interesting to make a brief survey of what has already been written on the subject of the sources of Browning's 'Saul'. In *The Bow and the Lyre : The Art of Robert Browning*, Roma A. King refers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's influence on her husband's poem which, he says, reflects both the spirit and technique of her own poems 'The Soul Travelling,' 'Earth and Her Praise', 'A Song Against Singing,' and 'Rhapsody of Life's Progress': 1

In *Modern Language Notes* (June 1929), on the other hand, there is a short note by William Lyon Phelps of Yale University, relating how one of his undergradu-

duates, a Mr. Moore, once pointed out to him the similarity between 'Saul' and Dr. John Brown's, 'The Cure of Saul'. Both W.L. Phelps and his student agree that Browning may have derived the idea of 'Saul' from this poem.

Dr. Brown was not much of a poet, for in his verses declamation roared while passion slept. Yet there is one passage in *Saul* where Browning uses the splendid figure of the rocky side of the mountain revealed after the spring snow-slide, that might have been inspired by Dr. Brown. In the latter's version, David sings of the processes of creation from primeval chaos to light and life, while

"In dumb Surprise the list'ning Monarch lay; ...3

W.L. Phelps goes on to quote the remaining lines of which the following are the most significant :

"The lab'ring Mountain rears his rock-encumber'd Head :

Down his steep and shaggy Side
The Torrent rolls his thund'ring Tide ;
Then smooth and clear, along the fertile plain
Winds his majestic waters to the distant main.4

The above lines are then compared with the following from Browning's 'Saul'.

Have ye seen when spring's arrowy summons
goes right to the aim,

And some mountain, the last to withstand her,
that held (he alone

While the vale laughed in freedom and flowers)
on a broad bust of stone

A year's snow bound above for a breastplate,
—leaves grasp the sheet ?

Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously
down to his feet, ... 5

In his short note the critic has tried to compare between Browning's poem and Dr. Brown's by basing his argument mainly on the presence of the mountain image. Another critic, George S. Wykoff, also discusses this point from the angle of subject-matter. This time, however, while quoting W.T. Young's opinion that the likeness lies between Browning's 'Saul' and Christopher Smart's 'Song to David' (1763),⁶ he affirms that another possible source may be Charles Mackay's, 'Saul and David'. This first came out in *Poems*, and later with many changes, in *The Hope of the World* (1840). Although he quotes E.B. Browning's not very flattering opinion of Mackay, it is rather difficult to accept Wykoff's assumption that

...there seems to be sufficient reason for believing that 'Saul and David' by Charles Mackay, was at least an indirect source of 'Saul' that Browning read the former poem, and that much of its content was retained, perhaps unconsciously in his retentive memory. More than that — or in other words, that the former poem was a direct, definite source of the latter and a positive influence on it, — surely no one can assert from the nature of the evidence.⁷

This is possible, of course, but it seems to me that the nature of the subject-matter in itself, would naturally

engender similarity in content if not in treatment, in any poem on David and Saul. Robert Browning had too original a mind, and his wife speaks in too scathing a tone of Mackay, for any poem by the latter to have had the slightest effect on Browning, direct or indirect.

... But for the *man*! To call him a poet !
A Prince and Potentate of commonplaces,
such as he is : — I have seen his name in the
Athenaeum attached to a lyric or two ...,
correctly called fugitive, — more than usually
fugitive !— but I never heard before that his
hand was in the prose department.

A third article on the sources of Browning's 'Saul' is by J.A. Macpeek, 'The Shaping of Saul.' It relates the poem to Wyatt's 'Seven Penitential Psalms'. There is distinct proof given here of Browning's familiarity with Wyatt's poetry, and it has always seemed to me that he owed much to the earlier poet, particularly in his use of the dramatic monologue, Chaucer, as we know, having been the preceding master of this form in *The Canterbury Tales*. There is also originality and humour in both the poetry of Wyatt and that of Browning, not to mention Chaucer's.

To return to Macpeek's article, however, we can sum up what he says on the subject as follows : that in spite of variations, the structure of both poems are very loosely linked with each other, and that although Browning does not resort to very close borrowings from the text, he makes use of the most outstanding images and ideas. After citing various examples to illustrate the

extent of these borrowings, Macpeek comes to the following conclusion :

It is clear that the main outline of *Saul* is thus provided for by Wyatt. With such a structure in mind Browning could expand with ease with songs and themes stemming possibly from *Daphnis and Chloe* and the *Song to David*, the *Minstrel*, operatic plays on the Saul and David story, and many other reminiscences from his reading⁹.

A great deal therefore, has been said about the origin of Browning's 'Saul'. This then brings us back to my first point : that of Byron's poem, 'Jephtah's Daughter' in its setting by Schumann, as having been another likely source of Browning's poem. This realisation came to me in a moment of acute perception which must have found its first expression in the subconscious. 'Jephtah's Daughter' was one of the *Hebrew Melodice* written at the request of the composer, Isaac Nathan, to be adapted to synagogal melodies. Nathan's musical setting of the poem is very inferior to that of Schumann, however, and in this new setting the poem becomes an inspired song.

It was Schumann's music¹⁰ which flashed through my mind without any conscious effort on my part, while I was looking up Browning's 'Saul.' The opening lines of this poem should also be compared with those of Byron's 'Song of Saul Before His Last Battle'.¹¹ There the anapaest is reversed to a dactyl to evoke the abruptness and strength of the opening lines of 'Saul.' Yet if this poem may have exercised a marked influence on Browning's poem, an even closer impact has been

left on it by 'Jephtah's Daughter'.¹² This is a closer poem to, Saul', not only in rhythm and meter, but also in mood. It is very possible that the beat in Byron's lines may have given birth to that in Browning's through Schumann's music, particularly since the latter poet was such a competent musician. Consequently he may have heard the song at the Schumanns' with whom he had struck up a good friendship. Their gatherings were memorable :

Two dinners with Joachim the musician — one with Made Schumann, and, better, one afternoon of their very admirable performance at a private house : one concert of Miss Zimmermann's — music in plenty ... 13.

Schumann's setting of 'Jephtah's Daughter' is the most beautiful to be found.¹⁴ In *A Hundred years of Music*, Gerald Abraham describes the symmetry of his music "as being literary where Chopin's is purely musical.¹⁵ Literature, he goes on to explain,

... led him to think of music far too much in terms of verse or rhapsodic prose — admittedly the two forms of literature in which the words approach most nearly to the conditions of music. 16.

The critic justly thinks that Schumann "miraculously enables the poet to become a musician"¹⁷ and he

... brings to the lyric music that needs nothing but those words, to give it articulate expression.

The use of anapaestic metre is also apparent in "The Destruction of Sennacherib", and although it is this very

aspect of the poem which Quiller-Couch seems to resent, there is no doubt that the movement of the verse sweeps through the poetry with the blast of a strong wind. In spite of this, he says, however, that

...the rest of *Hebrew Melodies* reads to me,
I confess, like a turgid school-exercise work :

or :

To the wolf and the vulture he leaves his wild
flock,

And descends to the plain live a stream from
the rock,

Then the pirates of Parga that live by the waves,
And teach the ple Franks what it is to be
slaves.

I protest that my tongue stammers against continuing. 19.

Once again, in Browning's 'Saul' as in Byron's poems, we are brought irrevocably to hear, through these very same lines, that compelling beat in the poem.

"... O Saul, it shall be

"A. Face like my face that receives thee; a
Man like to me,

"Thou shalt love and be loved by for ever : a
Hand like this hand

"Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee
See the Christ stand.20

It is interesting to compare the above lines with the opening bars of Schumann's song 'Jephtah's Daughter':

Con affetto. $\text{♩} = 120$.

Op 95, No 1

Succour Coun-try, our God, ah, my
Da die Hei-math, o Fa-ter, da

aire, — De-mand that thy daugh-ter expire; — Since thy tri-umph was
Gott sonder Toch-ter ver-lan-ge den Tod. — dein Er-lüb-de von

bought by thy vow — Strike the bo-som that's hard for thee now! And the
Feind uns be-freit, durch-bahr' mich, keh' sie-he be-reit! Und die

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In the poetry, as in the music, there is a basic pattern of a fixed number of strong stresses with occasional changes in the position of the weak stresses. In 'Saul', on the other hand, if the anapaestic metre of the poem were to be translated into a musical one, it would have been in 5/4 time — Schumann's song is in 4/4 time—the five beats of each line being regular right through the poem. Roma A. King finds that "the anapaestic pattern is so forcefully established that the kind of shifting stress found in most of Browning's poems becomes distracting in this one."²²

For a poet who has spent a lifetime studying music, it is not surprising that words should first have moulded themselves into definite rhythmical shapes lurking somewhere at the back of his mind during poetic composition. In his article, 'Robert Browning the Poet-Musician', R. W. S. Mendl points out the fact that Browning himself wrote song-settings which he sang, but which he later destroyed. The poems Mendl mentions are Donne's 'Go and catch a Falling Star,' Hood's 'I will not have the mad Clytie' and Peacock's 'In the mountain sheep are sweeter.'²³

There is also reference to "his charming improvisations at the piano to the delight of his (Browning's) friends, his composition of songs, his friendships with Joachim and Clara Schumann,"²⁴ as having helped his natural talent for music to flourish and converge with his poetic inspiration. Poet-musicians write with great concentration on sound, even though they may not be aware of it. Sometimes this poetic inspiration may come rather late to them on account of the forces of poetry and music pulling them simultaneously in different directions. When it does come, however, unity is then achieved, and the words are invariably forced into the intricate patterns of music which have 'become part of their

very souls, The words then emerge in rhythm till awareness tells of the fact that a poem has come into being. This then is what may have happened during the composition of 'Saul.' It may be argued that Browning's poem can easily have been inspired without the help of Schumann's music. This of course, is perfectly plausible, but it is easier for a poet to adapt his own words to a musical, rather than a strictly metrical poetic pattern, un-inspired by music. This is because the words of another poet would simply get in the way during composition. Although Browning, as a musician, would have found no difficulty in recognising and making use of Byron's metre in 'Jephtah's Daughter,' there is no doubt that the rhythm of music on its own is much purer and easier to transcribe into words than that of poetry.

JEPHTHA'S DAUGHTER.

Die Tochter Jephthas.

by BYRON.

Con affetto. $\text{♩} = 120$

Op 95. No 1

Sincere Coun-try, our God, oh, my...
Da die Hei-math, o' Tu-ter, da

ere, — De-mand that thy daugh-ter expire; — Sincere tri-umph was
Gott zonder Toch-ter ver-lan-get den Tod, — dein Ge-lüb-de rom

bought by thy vow — Strikethe bo-som the sword for thee now! And the
Feind uns be-freit, durch-bohr' mich, ich ste-he be-retzt! Und die
Lidde

voice of my quarrel is over. And the mountains be bold me no more.
 Stim . meder Klä . gen ist stumm . und mein Werk auf den Ber . gen ist um!

— If the hand that I love lay me low, There
 — Wird die Hand, die ich lie . be, mich weihn, kander

can not be pain in the blow! And of this, O my fa . ther, be
 Tod so nicht schmerzlich mir sein. Und das schwör ich dir, Aeu . lich und

sure — That the blood of thy child is as pure — As the blessing I
 gut, dass so rein ist mein kind li . ches Blut. — als der Seg . nenden

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won the great ba - tie for thee.
 - umph kam durch much each her bes,

And my fa - ther and soon thy are
 und mein Fa - ter, die Hei - lig sind

free!
 frei!

When the blood of thy
 Wenn das Blut, das du

dimin

gib - log bath gesh'd.
 gibst, ist ent, wallt.

When thy
 die du

Alina

cresc.

voice that thou lov'st is husb'd.
 heb test, die Stimp' er new hallt.

Let my ear mo-ry
 denk — mei-ner, die

still be thy pride. And for- get not
 Ruhm dir er ward, und ver- giss nicht, das

emild & died!
 la- chelnd ich start!

1. The University of Michigan Press, 1964, p. 102.
2. Vicar of Newcastle (1715 — 1766) and author of 'A Dissertation on the Rise, Union and Power, and the Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music to which is prefixed 'The Cure of Saul, a Sacred Ode', 1763. pp. 5 — 19. The ode itself was performed at Covent Garden, but I have not been able to trace the music.
3. Id., pp. 8 — 9.
4. W.L. Phelps, *ibid.* He quotes only two lines from this text, but this is the passage in full. See above, n. 2.
5. *Ibid.*
6. See W.T. Young, *Robert Browning : a Selection of Poems (1845—1864)*, 1911, n. to 'Saul', p. 216. Note that the date of publication here is the same as that of Browning poem. See also J.A. Macpeck's "The Shaping of Saul," *JEGP*, 1945, p. 360, n. 3.
7. *Philological Quarterly*, VII, 1928, p. 314.
8. *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, (1835 — 1846), ed. Elean Kintner (Letter to Browning of 12 Jan., 1846), Cambridge, Mass., 1969, p. 387.
9. *Op. cit.*, p. 365.
10. This has been discussed in my doctoral thesis of Nov. 1967 (University of London), on *The Light Thrown on the Poetry of Tennyson; Blake and Byron by the Musical Settings of British and Foreign Composers Who have Set Its Words to Music*. See pp. 369 — 74.
11. See R. Browning, *The Poetical Works*, I, 1896, p. 273.
12. *Myrthen*, op. 25, Augener & Co., 1889.
13. *Learned Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald (1867—1889)*, ed. D.C. Macpeck, Cambridge Mass., 1966, (Letter 70). See also *New Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. W.C. Devane and K.C. Knickerbocker, 1951, p. 304, and n. 2, pp. 304 — 4.
14. See songs listed in my thesis and compiled from the *British Museum Catalogue of Modern Music after 1800 (A-Z)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 421 — 34.
15. 1964, p. 34.
16. *Ibis*.
17. *Id.*, p. 37.
18. *Ibid.*

19. *Byron the Poet*, 'Byron a Study', (A Collection of Addresses and Essays) ed. W.A. Briscoe, 1924, p. 10. See also H.H. Hatcher, *The Versification of Robert Browning*. The author refers to Browning's aggressive sense of pattern" in 'Saul,' (Ohio, 1928, p. 26) but this description is more true of Byron's 'Song of Saul Before Last Battle', Hatcher seems to have felt the resemblance between these poems, but it is a pity he has not developed his point more fully.
21. *Myrthen*, op. cit., See Appendix to this article, p. 1.
22. Op. cit., p. 116.
23. *Music and Letters*, 2 Apr. 1961, p. 143.
24. Id., p. 150.