Manfred

Manfred is Byron’s first dramatic work. As its subtitle, “A Dramatic Poem,” indicates, it was not intended to be produced on the stage: Byron also referred to it as a “metaphysical” drama—that is, a drama of ideas. He began writing it in the autumn of 1816 while living in the Swiss Alps, whose grandeur stimulated his imagination; he finished the drama the following year in Italy.

Manfred’s literary forebears include the villains of Gothic fiction (another Manfred can be found in Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto; see p. 516) and of the Gothic dramas Byron had encountered during his time on the board of managers of London’s Drury Lane Theatre. Manfred also shares traits with the Greek Titan Prometheus, rebel against Zeus, ruler of the gods; Milton’s Satan: Ahasuerus, the legendary Wandering Jew who, having ridiculed Christ as he bore the Cross to Calvary, is doomed to live until Christ’s Second Coming: and Faust, who yielded his soul to the devil in exchange for superhuman powers. Byron denied that he had ever heard of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, and because he knew no German he had not read Goethe’s Faust, of which part I had been published in 1808. But during an August 1816 visit to Byron and the Shelley household, Matthew Lewis (author of the Gothic novel The Monk; see p. 528) had read parts of Faust to him aloud, translating as he went, and Byron worked memories of this oral translation into his own drama in a way that evoked Goethe’s admiration.

Like Byron’s earlier heroes, Childeric Harold and the protagonists of some of his Eastern tales, Manfred is bound by remorse—in this instance, for a transgression that (it is hinted but never quite specified) is incest with his sister Astarte: it is also hinted that Astarte has taken her own life. While this element in the drama is often regarded as Byron’s veiled confession of his incestuous relations with his half-sister, Augusta, and while Byron, ever the attention-seeker, in some ways courted this interpretation, the theme of incest was a common one in Gothic and Romantic writings. It features in The Monk and Walpole’s closet drama The Mysterious Mother (1768), and, at about the time Byron was composing his drama, it was also being explored by Mary and Percy Shelley.

The character of Manfred is its author’s most impressive representation of the Byronic Hero. Byron’s invention is to have Manfred, unlike Faust, disdainfully reject the offer of a pact with the powers of darkness. He thereby sets himself up as the totally autonomous man, independent of any external authority or power, whose own mind, as he says in the concluding scene (3.4.127–40), generates the values by which he lives “in sufferance or in joy,” and by reference to which he judges, rejoices, and finally destroys himself. In his work Ecce Homo, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, recognizing Byron’s anticipation of his own Übermensch (the “superman” who posits for himself a moral code beyond all traditional standards of good and evil), asserted that the character of Manfred was greater than that of Goethe’s Faust.

For more information on the context of Manfred, see “The Satanic and Byronic Hero” in the NAEL Archive.