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History and Play in Lord Byron's Dramas

Historie a hra v dramatech lorda Byrona

TEZE DISERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

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Recent years have seen a renewed and steadily increasing interest in Byron's engagement with, treatment of and conceptualization of history. Calling for a comprehensive appraisal of Byron's intense and sustained 'historicism', Caroline Franklin notes in her essay on 'Byron and history' that even the 'most cursory glance at Byron's *oeuvre* demonstrates the centrality of history to virtually everything he wrote'.¹ Byron, she says, 'adapts genres which stage the otherness of the past as some sort of performance, often bringing the poet's and the reader's present juxtaposition with it', and uses 'double entendres and parallels with the present, which include the viewing of the writing and performance of [literary works] as of historical significance'.² Indeed, Byron's self-professed 'grand passion' from 'the moment [he] could read' was 'history',³ and he was boasting of knowing it all from 'Herodotus down to Gibbon' as early as 1808.⁴ Byron's preoccupation with historical 'truth' is 'a truth universally acknowledged' these days, manifest as it is in all his writing, and discussed copiously in his correspondence – one example among many is his letter to Murray of 11 September 1820, where he writes, referring to *Marino Faliero*: 'I want to be as near the truth – as the Drama can be'.⁵ This deliberate striving towards 'the truth' of history, however, is a highly creative process on Byron's part and involves what Franklin describes as Byron's persistent 'engaging with, fictionalizing and critiquing [of] histories'.⁶ History, then, for Byron, is a complicated business, combining facts, accuracy and 'literary construct[s]', as he comes to 'a growing recognition that words do not simply reflect the "truth" of history, but are themselves required to actively shape history'.⁷ Indeed, Byron 'opens up' a 'perspective on how authority is legitimized in time through the writing of history'.⁸ For Byron, history, as 'subject matter, material, place [and] subjectivity, is vital, rather than

¹ Caroline Franklin, 'Byron and history', in Jane Stabler (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Byron Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.85 [pp. 81-105].

² Franklin, 'Byron and history', p.86.

³ *Detached Thoughts*, *BLJ* VIII, p.108.

⁴ Letter to R.Ch. Dallas of 21 January 1808, *BLJ* I, p.148.

⁵ *BLJ* VII, p.175.

⁶ Franklin, 'Byron and history', p.86. Franklin's call to scholars for a study of Byron as a 'historicist' poet was answered last year by Carla Pomarè's study of Byron's historical dramas and dramatic monologues entitled *Byron and the Discourses of History* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). Pomarè, 'call[s] attention to various examples of the interplay between Byron's writings and historiographical texts, considered not only as a source of historical information he cherished so much, but also as models from which he drew textual practices that were to become trademarks of his production, that is the massive use of footnotes and paratextual matter that is one of the focuses of [her] approach.' p.2.

⁷ Nat Leach, 'Historical Bodies in a "Mental Theatre": Byron's Ethics of History', *Studies in Romanticism* 46.1 (Spring 2007), p.9 [pp. 3-19].

⁸ Pomarè, *Byron and the Discourses of History*, p.87.

moribund⁹ – for, but also in, the present. His dramas also betray his convictions about – and canny portrayal of – the ‘theatricality’ of history.¹⁰

Byron and Drama

The history of the critical appraisal of Byron’s dramas until the end of the 1980s is perplexing. As late as 1988, Corbett sums up the preceding summa of criticism on the dramas as nearly universally deprecatory, taking for granted and building on the critical ‘cant’ of Byron’s contemporaries, which was handed down all the way to the second half of the last century. Corbett notes that, as a result, the dramas have been ‘misunderstood’, ‘understudied’ and ‘misrepresented’,¹¹ and stages a necessary vindication of them,¹² heralding a slow change of tide – but it was as late as the 1990s before a steady and varied critical interest in Byron’s dramas was kindled. More recently, in the last few years, we have also seen the interest in Byron’s dramas coincide with a growing interest in Byron’s sojourn in and engagement with Italy.

As Alan Richardson notes, ‘Byron wrote eight dramatic works, more than any major poet since Dryden.’ The renewed interest in, and deeper appreciation of, these dramas, however, does not rule out simplifications of them. A fan of the ‘metaphysical dramas’, Richardson readily slams the historical dramas as ‘verbally rich but static and somewhat pedantic tragedies that rather justify [Byron’s] poor reputation as a playwright’.¹³ Yet Richard Lansdown’s seminal study approached the works from the opposite spectrum a few years later, and went a long way towards vindicating the historical dramas.¹⁴ Then another major 1990s study of Romantic

⁹ Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.9.

¹⁰ Leach, ‘Historical Bodies in a “Mental Theatre”: Byron’s Ethics of History’, p.5. As Watkins remarks, ‘in his dramas [Byron] plunged beneath surface considerations, such as episode and spectacle, in an attempt to develop a coherent imaginative portrayal of these principles and thereby to extend the definition of historical truth.’ ‘The Dramas of Lord Byron’, in *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama*, p.143. Here Watkins circles around the defining feature of Byron’s style in general and oversimplifies and simultaneously underestimates the ‘episode and spectacle’ aspect of the dramas. But he is right in stressing Byron’s attempt to convey a wider, more complex concept of historical truth in his dramas.

¹¹ Corbett, *Byron and Tragedy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), p.1.

¹² Though there are notable exceptions to the rule – see Jerome McGann’s discussion of the dramas in *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1968), pp.205-273, for instance, or Anne Barton’s comprehensive article “‘A Light to Lesson Ages’: Byron’s Political Plays”, in John D. Jump (ed.), *Byron: A Symposium* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp.138-162.

¹³ Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theatre: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1988), p.43.

¹⁴ For a summary of critical material on Byron’s dramas prior to 1992, see Richard Lansdown, *Byron’s Historical Dramas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.2. For an overview of the critical responses of Byron’s contemporaries, see Corbett, *Byron and Tragedy*, pp. 1-17. A representative summa of famous critical responses spanning across the nineteenth century up to 1910 is available in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Lord Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970).

drama, this time by Daniel Watkins, enhanced our understanding of Byron's dramas further by noting the author's vital interest in the dramatic work of Vittorio Alfieri, which engendered the composition of *Marino Faliero*, and Byron's 'identifying himself with the prestigious tradition of opposition literature in which Alfieri stands'.¹⁵ The link to Alfieri opens up formal and well as political ways into Byron's dramas, and Byron's determined preoccupation with dramatic form at the beginning of his neo-classical project is famous: avowing that his 'dramatic simplicity is *studiously* Greek'. Byron set out 'to make a *regular* English drama – no matter whether for the stage or not – which is not [his] object – but a mental theatre.'¹⁶

Yet Alfieri's neo-classicism is not Byron's only model for his dramas. Byron 'continually experimented with poetic ideas and methods rather than resting with a fixed and clearly defined form. He moved easily from historical drama to metaphysical drama' just as he did 'from energetic satire to sentimental narrative'¹⁷ – indeed, crucially, according to Watkins, 'Byron's view of drama provides the clearest guide to his poetics' generally.¹⁸ In fact, it is the 'perfectly poised paradox'¹⁹ that is characteristic of Byron's writing, but constitutive of his dramas in particular, that we approach in our study. But this study is also concerned with the larger development of Byron's 1820-22 dramatic project. Studies dedicated to only the 'metaphysical' or the 'historical' dramas from this period necessarily leave out crucial elements of the evolution of Byron's dramatic art. Equally, studies focusing on one particular genre, such as Corbett's, are tuned into a set of criteria that inevitably neglects other aspects of the works. This study approaches Byron's 1820-22 dramas as a sustained dramatic project, inaugurated with *Marino Faliero* and ending with *The Deformed Transformed*. It concentrates on the project's vibrant dynamics of theme and discourse. Above all, however, it focuses on the play of, and with, history that marks, indeed in many ways defines, that project *as* a project.

¹⁵ Daniel P. Watkins, 'The Dramas of Lord Byron', in *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1993), p.143. For a brief analysis of Byron's involvement and strong sense of personal affinity with Alfieri, see e.g. C.P. Brand, 'Italian Drama', in *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, repr. 2011), pp.120-2. As Watkins observes, Byron '[i]n fact ... eventually surpassed Alfieri's rather limited juxtaposition of tyrant and hero – which Byron believed often reduced art to 'political dialogues' [*BLJ* VII, p. 150] – and created a more subtle and sophisticated political poetics'. *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama*, p.143.

¹⁶ Letter to Murray of 23 August 1821, *BLJ* VIII, p. 187. As McGann notes, the 'separation of the drama from the theatre is an index of Romanticism itself.' 'Lord Byron's Twin Opposites of Truth', in *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), n.3, p.39.

¹⁷ Watkins, *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama*, p.143.

¹⁸ Watkins, *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama*, p.142. See also F.M. Doherty, 'Byron and the Sense of the Dramatic', in B. Beatty and V. Newey (eds), *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp.226-241.

¹⁹ Corbett, *Byron and Tragedy*, p.1.

Byron was a magpie when it comes to plotlines – which is hardly unusual considering the precedent of Shakespeare, even though the Bard is not the dramatist Byron would allegedly wish to follow. Byron also has particular preferences and guiding principles as to his dramatic subject matter: ‘hat[ing] things *all fiction*’, he posits that there ‘should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric’, as ‘pure invention’ is for Byron ‘but the talent of a liar.’²⁰

‘Fact’ is something of a moveable feast for Byron, but the desire for ‘some foundation’ to build his dramas on is important. Where *Manfred* grandly launches into an essentially Byronic fictional world (while drawing on a variety of other texts and traditions along the way), the dramas that constitute Byron’s 1820-22 dramatic project begin with histories and stories that are not Byron’s own. Byron’s two Venetian history plays, *Sardanapalus*, *Werner*, *The Deformed Transformed* all represent historical events, though *Werner* takes its plot from Harriet Lee’s *Kruitznier, or the German’s Tale* (and *The Deformed Transformed* is a meta-historical tour de force), and *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* act out, even if they also take issue with, well-known versions of human history from Scripture and assorted Apocrypha. In each case, however, Byron plays with historical ‘fact’, the Old Testament or his founding fictional text in ways that produce a kind of drama that becomes an arena for dialectical battle. Indeed, we might say that Byron creates a characteristic ‘chaos of dialectical paradox’²¹ in these dramas, but dialectic is only part of their larger design. Their ‘swift movements from the land of the real to the land of the unreal and back again’ are, more than simply dialectic, the ‘to-and-fro movement’ which Gadamer emphasizes as crucial to and constitutive of play: a ‘to-and-fro movement’ that ‘is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end’, and which sees ‘play [a]s the occurrence of the movement as such’²² – signalling towards the unfettered conceptual, structural and thematic dynamics of Byron’s work. This essential fluidity is very often misunderstood, even by Byronists – ranging through inept irresolution, lack of authorial commitment, arch narrative flippancy, and indiscriminate vagueness resulting from the author’s lack of direction, the accusations thrown at Byron’s texts in general and the dramas in particular miss what is most original about them, as here: Philip Davis reads Byron as lost in ‘swift movements [between actuality and fiction]

²⁰ Byron to Murray, 2 April 1817, *BLJ* V, p. 203.

²¹ Philip Davis, ‘“I leave the thing a problem, like all things”: Trying to Catch up with Byron’, in B. Beatty and V. Newey (eds), *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), p.259 [pp.242-284].

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen Doepel, 2nd revised edition by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York and London: Continuum, 2011), p. 104. Similarly Wolfgang Iser: ‘there is a continual oscillation between denotation and figuration, and between accommodation and assimilation. This oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, is basic to play, and it permits the coexistence of the mutually exclusive. It also turns the texts into a generative matrix for the production of something new.’ ‘The Play of the Text’, in *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p.255.

and back again, till at times he hardly knew one from the other or doubted the difference.²³ Reasonable as this may sound as a description of one of the impressions that Byron's works might leave their readers with, it does not recognise that this indeterminacy is an authorial strategy, not intellectual negligence. Indeed, while this in-her-face nonchalance, perhaps the most controversial trademark of Byron's style and technique, is widely misinterpreted in this way, when contemplated from the vantage point of play theory, the distinction between 'the land of the real and the land of the unreal' this misreading of Byron rests on simply does not hold – and this is precisely the point Byron's dramas are very deliberately making. The genius of Byron's 1820-22 dramas lies in their creating and charting this blurred territory between fact and fiction, which ostensibly boasts the facts yet incorporates them indivisibly into fiction, showing that the so-called 'land of the real' and 'the land of the unreal' are really versions of the same thing: history is a written record, a version or interpretation of the past, not a catalogue of incontestable facts.²⁴ History is as fictional as it is factual. For Byron, history is an open, dynamic structure – essentially a realm of play, where contradictory forces and interpretations ceaselessly contend for territory and dominion. And this essential play of indeterminacy must also extend to the language in which history has its very being – while Byron is invariably in control of his rhetoric he is, at the same time, always pointing out the free-wheeling multiplicity of meaning innate to language – and the ostentatious oscillation of meaning that runs through the language of Byron's dramas implies a deep association with the principle of play, an association we see confirmed again and again in the dramas this thesis is looking at. It is not only Sardanapalus who leaves the thing 'a problem' (V.i.447)²⁵ – Byron himself is always at pains to do precisely this in as many ways as he can. In his 1820-22 dramas, perhaps the greatest problem he 'leaves' us with is the very nature of history as both the 'land of the real' and 'the land of the unreal'.

Yet this indeterminacy remains perhaps the most widely misunderstood facet of Byron's style and general approach to poetry – a wisely playful lack of a system. As Byron famously put

²³ Davis, 'I leave the thing a problem, like all things': Trying to Catch up with Byron', p.259.

²⁴ As shown by Hayden White's classic study *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) and collected essays in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), where he reveals the structures of historical and fictional writing to be similar. The 'tropes' of discourse 'prefigure the perceptual field' to facilitate sense (*Metahistory*, p.30). The historian, like the author of fiction, deliberately opts for a 'trope' to frame his rendition of the 'facts' into a coherent narrative.

²⁵ In the context of Byron's entire oeuvre, Sardanapalus' grave act of self-immolation and his lofty, solemn address to posterity gains levity through the inter-textual echo of the narrator of *Don Juan* who 'leave[s] the thing a problem, like all things' (*DJ* XVII, xiii). As Davis observes, "the thing" is typical of Byron's only sketchily ordered language – it is precisely vague, perspicuously opaque, a language at once casually at ease in its own terms yet baffled by the referents of its own meaning. For so often in Byron, the centre of clarity in the language is acutely conscious of itself as not the centre of control as to the meaning of things.' 'I Leave the Thing a Problem, Like All Things', p.274.

it himself: ‘when a man talks of system, his case is hopeless.’²⁶ Indeed, as he puts it in *Don Juan*’s satirical feat of ‘systemophagy’: ‘one system eats another up / And this much as old Saturn ate his progeny’ – ‘But system doth reverse the Titan’s breakfast, / And eats her parents’ (*DJ* XIV, i-ii). Byron is well aware of the arbitrariness of values and temporariness of all systems, and so he would rather resort to satire than invest in the redeeming power of Romantic metaphysics. Not even at his high-Romantic peak, in *Manfred*, does he endorse a transcendental remedy, but, on the contrary, heralds the limits and inadequacies of all dependencies on metaphysical transcendence. In the end, even the Miltonic echo of the mind in its glorious autonomy and autonomous ethics, is eventually, in *Cain*, taken apart to reveal the adverse side of blind intellectual pursuit and its foundering potential. As we shall see, there is a decidedly ‘bleak pessimism’²⁷ in Byron’s dramas.

Yet for many readers it seems that ‘Byron can only try to suggest order and disorder at the same time.’²⁸ Again, Davis, alongside a host of other critics, misunderstands the implications of Byron’s poetic technique – clearly signalling towards the realm of play, Byron’s is a playful ‘to-and-fro’ dynamic that does not simply ‘suggest’ order and disorder, but constitutes itself out of both. Hinting at the open system of Byron’s ‘trying to suggest order and disorder at the same time’, Davis in fact appears more attentive to the essential ludic nature of Byron’s work than most, yet he remains only on the cusp of properly grasping this as a clear indication of Byron’s deeply rooted affiliation to play, which is manifest in all aspects of his writing.²⁹

It is this affiliation, then, that makes Byron’s engagement with history in his ‘historical’ dramas so rich and complex. Although he calls his Venetian tragedies ‘strictly historical’, his authorial playfulness makes them a much more interesting combination of historical fact and fiction. For instance, Byron decides (and states so in his preface to the drama), for the sake of keeping to the classical unities of time and action, to have Marino Faliero be presented with the coup, so that it is effectively not of his own making, while historically Faliero was its instigator. This substantially changes matters regarding the issue of Faliero’s revolutionary zeal or historical culpability (depending on the political viewpoint of the reader) – making him an honorary guest player in someone else’s game, rather than the mastermind of the coup. The neo-classical frame of the drama – the continental, classical form through which Byron seeks to ‘reform the English

²⁶ Letter to Thomas Moore of 1 June 1818, *BLJ* VI, pp. 46-7.

²⁷ Corbett, *Byron and Tragedy*, p.1.

²⁸ Davis, ‘I leave the thing a problem, like all things’: Trying to Catch up with Byron’, p.274.

²⁹ The ludic quality of Byron’s poetry in terms of tone was well captured by James Soderholm’s article ‘Byron’s Ludic Lyrics’, in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 34.4 (Autumn 1994), pp.739-751, and, more recently, David Gabelman’s ‘Bubbles, Butterflies and Bores: Play and Boredom in *Don Juan*’, in *The Byron Journal* 38.2 (2010), pp.145-156. Soderholm praises the ‘open-ended’, ‘antic and antithetical’ disposition of Byron’s poetry, ‘powerfully revising Romantic sentiment and sincerity’ (pp.749,750).

stage³⁰ – thus becomes complicit in a playful unleashing of creativity that clashes with, and complicates, the ‘strictly historical’ project Byron simultaneously vows to adhere to. More importantly, though, this significant act of rewriting on Byron’s part points towards precisely the principle of play as we shall come to explore it. As this thesis argues, play defines Byron’s take on history in the dramas he wrote between 1820 and 1822. *Marino Faliero*, for instance, plays the vow to historical truth against the originality of its dramatic composition, starting with the motives of the protagonists. Faliero, for one, has been ‘historically’ rendered as a stock old jealous man, yet Byron decides not to base his doge on this trait as part of a strategy of revealing and playing with the fictionality of all representations of history – offering an alternative rendering of the ‘known facts’ that supplements, as it were, the official histories with a vindication of the protagonist condemned by those official histories as traitor – or as an Epicurean sloth-ridden king in the case of Sardanapalus.³¹ Historical facts always come down to us through interpretations, and while Byron’s dramas seek to counter and critique official ‘history’, which ‘can only take things in the gross’ (*DJ* VIII, iii), his own representations of historical ‘truth’ are overtly personal, interested – Byronic – simultaneously factual and fictional. Byron’s is not an earnest attempt to ‘correct’ history’s mistakes by establishing the ‘truth’, but a playful personal reflection on ‘the fluidity of the historical universe of his time’, interrogating ‘the facts’ but also the work of ‘positivist approaches to history’,³² revealing but also exemplifying the unavoidable bias of ‘History’s purchased page’ (*DJ* III, xlvi).

So Carla Pomarè, in her recent study of Byron, is absolutely right to argue that the historical documents that Byron supplies in his appendices and notes to his dramas ‘ultimately question’ not only ‘the stability of historical discourse’ but also the ‘self-sufficient nature’ of Byron’s own dramas.³³ Pomarè here helps us to no longer see Byron’s dramas as part of a puzzle of meaning dependent on the supplement of the historical appendices. Rather than complementing the ultimate ‘truth’ of the drama, Byron’s appendices, by showing the contingency of the historical record, effectively render the dramas as texts ‘not permit[ing] any comparison with reality as the secret measure of verisimilitude’. Those texts are, instead, ‘raised above all such comparisons – and hence also above the question of whether it is all real –

³⁰ Paraphrasing Byron’s *Hours of Idleness*, where he beckons Sheridan to write ‘[o]ne classic drama, and reform the stage’ (585).

³¹ As Philip Shaw observes, Byron ‘disrupts the smug luminescence of historical totality’, so that ‘the suppressed past may be allowed to speak.’ ‘Lord Byron’s War with Posterity’, in *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.181.

³² Pomarè, *Byron and the Discourses of History*, pp.4-5. For a detailed list of Byron’s reading of historical sources, see Pomarè, ‘Byron in the Historical Department’, in *Byron and the Discourses of History*, pp. 9-12.

³³ Pomarè, *Byron and the Discourses of History*, p.99.

because a superior truth speaks from [them].³⁴ To put this another way, Byron's dramatic strategy is what Gadamer terms 'the joy of knowledge' – Byron's 'transformation' of history into dramatic 'structure' is a 'transformation into the true'.³⁵ Yet the 'true' here is not some sort of higher historical, psychological, moral or philosophical 'truth' – the 'superior truth' of Byron's dramas is the 'indissoluble ambiguity' of 'artistic play'.³⁶ This 'indissoluble ambiguity' is the paradox at the heart of Byron's writing, and the theory of play proves unprecedentedly congenial to Byron for this reason more than any other, able to help us trace the intricacy of his work in all its glory. Throughout his 1820-22 dramatic project, Byron, crucially, plays with history in order to get as close as possible to the truth of history, revealing history as an open, dynamic field of contending forces – and this essentially ludic technique, along with its implications and subversive potential, is the focus of our study.

The study begins with *Marino Faliero*, the aims of which are summarized by Byron in a letter to Murray as follows: 'My object has been to dramatise, like the Greeks (a modest phrase), striking passages of history, as they did of history and mythology. You will find all this very unlike Shakespeare'.³⁷ In his all-important preface to *Marino Faliero*, he concludes: 'Whether I have succeeded or not in the tragedy, I have at least transferred into our language a historical fact worthy of commemoration'.³⁸ From this tragedy, we will follow Byron's dramatization and commemoration of 'striking passages' of European, Middle-Eastern and biblical history, by means of their transference into new, highly literary texts, through to *The Deformed Transformed*, Byron's last dramatic experiment, in which '[t]he tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humour.' As Deleuze terms it, 'humour is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense; humour is the art of surfaces and doubles, of nomad singularities, and of an always displaced aleatory point'.³⁹ As it proceeds through these dramas, this study traces, in Deleuze's terms, the trademark 'co-extensiveness' of Byron's shift from the tragic and ironic, fully explored in *Childe Harold*, the Venetian dramas and *Sardanapalus*, to the explosiveness of 'vivacious versatility' (*DJ* XIII, xcvi) we find in both *Don Juan* and the equally charged, subversive spiel of *The Deformed Transformed*. Byron's drama here 'calls attention to a hidden constellation of forces' through which history 'proceeds [...] to gather up the odd and the disparate'⁴⁰ – how, to put this another

³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.112.

³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.112.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 454.

³⁷ Letter to Murray of July 14 1821, *BLJ* VIII, p.151.

³⁸ Preface to *Marino Faliero*, *CPW* IV, p.303.

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.141.

⁴⁰ J.J. McGann, 'Literature and the Critique of History', in *The Beauty of Inflections* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.269.

way, in the Byronic universe, history and play are indivisibly intertwined, revealing an essential dynamic open-endedness comprised of a ‘to-and-fro movement’ marked by multi-faceted, paradoxical indeterminacy and thought-provoking ambiguity.

Thesis Structure

This study of Byron’s dramas is divided into five chapters. These five chapters trace the steadily discernible development of Byron’s extended dramatic experimentation – starting from the neo-classical historical dramas, via his experimental recasting of the biblical mystery plays, and of tragedy as such, to the culmination of Byron’s experiment with drama in his last unfinished dramatic piece. The sequence of our study gleans from Byron’s dramatic oeuvre the tentative but progressive movement towards what we will call ‘free play’, tracing its ultimate liberation from the constraints of the ‘instrumental’, motivated ‘play’ of both literary genre and history, which each seek to limit ludic potential and contain ‘free play’ within strict ordering frameworks. The limits imposed by the ‘instrumental play’ of genre and history are, as we shall see, gradually and increasingly tested and finally transcended in Byron’s last three dramas to allow for an unprecedented experimental unleashing of ‘free play’, which manifests itself in a range of formal, discursive and thematic transgressions.

Two points should be made clear at this stage. One, this study begins with *Marino Faliero*, thus omitting the first and perhaps the most famous and widely influential of Byron’s dramas, *Manfred*. This omission is necessary in order to sustain the tight focus of this study, namely Byron’s treatment and exploration of play, history and the telling of history in the dramatic experimentation he sustained from 1820 to 1822.⁴¹ The second point is closely related to the first. This study discusses Byron’s two biblical dramas, which are not concerned with history *per se*. This is justifiable for a number of reasons, however, the chief of which is, firstly, that Byron’s dramatic treatment of the Bible is analogous, if not entirely identical, to his treatment of historical sources because, secondly, Byron’s approach to historical sources blurs their difference from other kinds of texts, including the Bible and fiction. Historical and biblical texts are here both perceived as accounts of humanity’s past that exert authority – but do not represent ‘truth’ – through various rhetorical and interpretative strategies and through their historical reception and reinterpretation. In both cases, Byron goes on to push against and

⁴¹ Needless to say, *Manfred* represents, the focus of history aside, a play-text along different lines of analysis, and will provide the meat for future study.

experiment with these authoritative, ‘authorized’ readings of the past in various ways, revealing in his wake the bias and partiality – as well as the striking literariness – of both kinds of traditionally authoritative texts.

That said, one of the aims of this study is to demonstrate the extent to which, read together, the seven dramas discussed in this study, written in a high-continuous period of just two years, manifestly represent a fascinating, and in some ways self-contained, universe of thematic and conceptual cross-pollination and progressive experimental development. These dramas clearly mark Byron as a major figure of early nineteenth-century English drama, as Corbett has previously argued in his comprehensive 1988 study *Byron and Tragedy*.⁴² Each stands up, despite previous critical neglect, as a highly original work in its own right. But together, as this study seeks to show, they represent a sustained and profound meditation on history, literature, the theatricality of both, and the fundamental role of play in all of these things. Our focus on play, with the help of Wolfgang Iser’s methodology of play, will also uncover a number of other previously overlooked or misinterpreted facets of these works, and thereby, I hope, go some way to explaining why Byron (but relatively few people at the time or since) rated them so highly.

A Note on Methodology

This study’s use of the term ‘play’ is based on the typology of play formulated by Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games*.⁴³ and adapted for use in literary studies by Wolfgang Iser, shifting the original anthropological and ethnographical focus of Caillois towards a more abstracted, schematic concept of this methodology useful for literary analysis. In *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Iser identifies play in literature as the dynamic ‘contraflow of free and instrumental play’,⁴⁴ where instrumental ‘play strives for a result and free play breaks up any result achieved’.⁴⁵ ‘Instrumental play’ thus functions as ‘a recuperation of what free play disperses’.⁴⁶

According to Iser, the four categories of play – *agon*, *alea*, *ilinx* and *mimicry* – ‘generally mix’ in literature and thus represent ‘the constitutive elements of a text game’.⁴⁷ He defines the

⁴² ‘Each of those dramatic works has a serious intellectual content, shows considerable formal accomplishment and has a decided innovatory tendency.’ Summing up the stage history of ‘four of these works’ and the unique nineteenth-century success of *Werner*, Corbett argues that all these ‘circumstances suggest that Byron, if not a major dramatist, should rank in critical opinion with other important dramatists: with Webster, or Marlowe, or Dryden himself.’ *Byron and Tragedy*, xi.

⁴³ Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958); first published in English by the Free Press in New York in 1961.

⁴⁴ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.247.

⁴⁵ Iser, *Prospecting*, p.257.

⁴⁶ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, xviii.

⁴⁷ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.263.

four strategies of play as follows: *agon* ‘is undoubtedly one of the basic games’⁴⁸ – it ‘has to be played towards a result’⁴⁹ and marks ‘a fight or a contest’.⁵⁰ *Alea* ‘is a pattern of play based on change and the unforeseeable’⁵¹ – when given the upper hand, it aims to ‘intensify difference’ and ‘reduces all play to mere chance’.⁵² *Mimicry* ‘aims to make difference disappear’ and signifies ‘illusion’ as well as ‘transmogrification’ and ‘imitation’.⁵³ The fourth and last of Iser’s play strategies – *ilinx* – marks his most notable literary recasting of Caillois’ vertigo-inducing play activity, investing this subversive play strategy with ‘an anarchic tendency’, identifying it with ‘the Fool figure’ and ‘carnivalization’; its potential rests in subverting given structures, and it represents ‘free play at its most expansive’.⁵⁴

While Iser’s typology of play presented in *Prospecting* and developed in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* draws on Caillois’ classic 1958 treatise on play, Caillois himself draws on his predecessor, Johan Huizinga, and his pioneering 1938 study *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*.⁵⁵ But the theory of play is a vast discipline, whose roots reach back to the cradle of Western culture and the philosophy of ancient Greece.⁵⁶ From Heraclitus and Plato the philosophy of play branched out across the ages, in various foci, resurfacing in Byron’s own time in Schiller’s utopian aesthetic state governed by the *Spieltrieb*, to then reappear in the chance-affirming, anti-authoritative and relativistic philosophy of Nietzsche, in Gadamer’s aesthetic theory, in post-structuralism’s preoccupation with the innate play of language and the contingency of structures, as explored, for instance, by Derrida,⁵⁷ and in the dice-throw and ‘ideal game’ of Deleuze. Recent years have seen renewed interest in the theory of play, manifest, for instance, in the 2009 special issue of *New Literary History* devoted to play. While this study consults many of these seminal play theorists, its core, however, is primarily structured by Iser’s quartet of play strategies.

⁴⁸ Though, as Iser points out, ‘not the be-all and end-all that Huizinga ...considered it to be.’ *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.260.

⁴⁹ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.260.

⁵⁰ Iser, *Prospecting*, p.256.

⁵¹ Iser, *Prospecting*, p.256.

⁵² Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.261.

⁵³ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.262.

⁵⁴ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p.262.

⁵⁵ *Homo Ludens* was first published in German in Switzerland in 1944; the English translation followed in 1949, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁵⁶ For a brief introductory review of the theory of play, see Sura P. Rath, ‘Game, Play, Literature: An Introduction’, in *The South Central Review* 3.4 (Winter 1986), pp.1-4.

⁵⁷ Beginning with Derrida’s seminal critique of structuralism ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences’, given at a conference at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1966, published in *Writing and Difference* a year later. ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp.278-93.

Indeed, it is a great pity, to my mind, that Iser's framework of play strategies has not been used more widely by literary scholars. The most recent addition to the library on the theory of play, the 2013 collection of essays entitled *The Philosophy of Play* published by Routledge, contains not a single note on Iser's work on play in literature.⁵⁸ It is therefore something of a privilege for this study to recover Iser's highly lucid methodological framework for literary play, and to show how it can prove extremely useful for the analysis of literary texts in general and for the study of Byron in particular – a poet whose trademark conceptual, structural, thematic and discursive playfulness is often taken for little more than authorial negligence or a lack of intellectual rigour. Set against the fireworks of wit that is *Don Juan*, Byron's dramas have also been read as rather serious, stern and static, even if, at their best, they are sometimes seen as petri dishes for experimenting with themes and ideas that Byron would then feed into his satirical *magnum opus*.⁵⁹ This study, using Iser's methodology of play to elucidate the heretofore undiscovered dynamics of Byron's dramas, sets out to rectify these long-ingrained misapprehensions. By doing so, it also hopes to make a case for the wider employment of Iser's methodology of play in literary studies.

Conclusions

As it emerges in his 1820-1822 dramatic project from the interaction of those strategies of play that characterizes all of the dramas this study discusses, history is, for Byron, neither an arena of objectivity nor a refuge from the self – his literary rendering of it makes history personal. Nor is time a healer for Byron – there is no comfort to be found in the lapse of historical ages. Culminating in his playful rendering of history in *The Deformed Transformed*, Byron's take on history there amounts to the hallmark mix of intensity and detachment we know from the best of his satires and from *Don Juan*. Byron's is an incessant quest for a *mot juste* (or *mots justes*) with which to describe a particular historical moment or comment on a more general historical panorama. At the heart of this mix of seriousness and playfulness, we can also see Byron using

⁵⁸ Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell and Malcolm Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁹ As Carla Pomarè observes: '[s]ignificantly enough, Byron interrupted the composition of [*Don Juan*] in mid-1821 (after writing the first five cantos) to resume it again only in early 1822, when his experiments with drama were over. ... [Critics have seen] in the plays, and particularly in the historical trilogy ... a laboratory where Byron experimented with themes and modes of writing which would become typical of the longer poem. Indeed, the historical tragedies, with their heavy reliance on documentary material, might be seen as providing Byron with a working model for the development of *Don Juan*'. *Byron and the Discourses of History*, pp.98-9.

all the stylistic arms he can wield to escape from the monotonous depiction of historical annals and other authoritative texts framed by the glorification of the ‘just’ winners and lament for the fallen. Byron engages his talent and wit in acutely presenting the irreducibility of actual experience. Byron’s dramas present a sustained caveat against the temptation to glorify or indeed explicate history, to pin down history with an idealized, aestheticized version of it. Rather than a cheap spectacle, Byron’s truly mental theatre portends a teasing of the intellect that ‘tease[s] us out of thought’ – or rather out of those conventional thoughts we so often thoughtlessly rest in.

This study discusses Byron’s three historical, two biblical and two fiction-based dramas written between 1820 and 1822 to show how the poet seeks original ways of transcending the given, be it fact, Scripture or fiction. Byron treats the ‘source texts’ in largely similar ways – be it history, the Bible or a work of fiction, and, crucially, these dramas explore and exemplify the ways in which Byron points out the inescapable propinquity of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. This study traces and uncovers the multi-layered intricacies of Byron’s 1820-1822 dramas, gleaned from these largely marginalized works using Iser’s methodology of ‘the play of the text’, a methodology, as this study hopes to show, particularly congenial to the analysis of Byron. In his dramas, as this study shows, Byron seeks to convey on the one hand an understanding of the essentially biased genesis of all received traditions – historical, religious and literary – and on the other hand an understanding of a universe perpetually at play, where the only way to portray some approximation of ‘truth’ is to work in and with open-ended, dynamic, essentially indeterminate structures, in which this ‘oscillation, or to-and-fro movement’ of play enables the ‘coexistence of the mutually exclusive’ and creates ‘a generative matrix for the production of something new’.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Iser, ‘The Play of the Text’, in *Prospecting*, p.255.

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