Byron and Tragedy

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First published 1988

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Corbett, Martyn
Byron and tragedy
1. Byron, George Gordon Byron, *Baron* —
Criticism and interpretation
1. Title
822'.7 PR4388
ISBN 0–333–44336–5

Foreword

It was, Martyn Corbett reminds his readers, a familiar adage in the greenrooms of the second half of the nineteenth century that 'Shakespeare spells ruin, and Byron bankruptcy'. Shakespeare's plays, in acting texts stripped of later 'improvements', have long since regained box-office credibility. Byron's eight verse plays, on the other hand, still remain essentially untested in the theatre. Written at a time when the English stage, as Byron himself asserted in the preface to *Marino Faliero*, was 'not a very exalted object of ambition', they consciously rejected not only Shakespeare as a model but also the tastes and expectations of a contemporary theatre-going public about which Byron, in consequence of his earlier service on the Drury Lane Committee, knew a good deal. Either, as Byron himself had wished, these plays were not performed at all in the nineteenth century, or they were adapted and tortured into mindless spectaculars. Audiences at Charles Kean's production of Byron's *Sardanapalus* in June 1853 could admire the Palace of Nimrod at sunset, in moonlight, and (finally) burning down. What they were carefully shielded from was the 'struggle of idea with idea' (in Martyn Corbett's words) at the heart of this, as of all Byron's plays.

It is only now, perhaps, in a post-Brechtian theatre, that *Sardanapalus, Marino Faliero, Cain* and the others are ready to be performed as Byron wrote them. Martyn Corbett, at one time himself a professional actor, is an intelligent and persuasive advocate for their dramatic (or, in the case of *The Deformed Transformed*, cinematic) virtues and possibilities. A constant sense of acting potential is one of the strengths of this book. Another is its admirable sense of the consistency and coherence of Byron's dramatic achievement, and of his deeply pessimistic tragic vision. Where earlier critics have automatically separated the three neoclassical plays from *Manfred, Cain* and, if they attended to them at all, *Heaven and Earth* and *The Deformed Transformed*, Corbett, reminding us how closely in time all Byron's dramatic works were composed, sees them as illuminatingly interdependent. Whether they choose to subject themselves to the unities (one way of combating the stifling influence of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama), or daringly depict what Marlowe in Dr Faustus only described – a journey through interstel-

lar space – all Byron's plays seem locked in a dialogue with one another. This dialogue turns centrally, Corbett argues, upon the question of man's control of his own destiny. Within it, certain plays demand to be seen as opposing but complementary pairs: *Marino Faliero* and *Cain*, for instance, *The Two Foscari* and *Heaven and Earth*, or *The Deformed Transformed* as a near-parody of *Cain*. He is especially provocative and illuminating in his insistence upon seeing Byron's heroines (Angiolina and Marina, Myrrha, Adah, Anah and Aholibamah) both individually, as powerful forces within their own plays, and as an evolving group – as he is in placing the entire dramatic *ouevre* within a changing but common relationship with Byron's 'Prometheus' lyric of 1816.

This is very much a book designed, in the manner of the best criticism, to send the reader back to the texts themselves. It sets out to convey the author's own alert sense of how intellectually complex and vital this neglected body of drama, Byron's self-styled 'mental theatre', really is. It also constitutes a timely plea for the performance of these plays as Byron wrote them, without adaptation, and with the directorial emphasis they require, upon words, emotions and ideas rather than spectacle. Only the theatre can truly establish Byron's plays for what they are: the only significant body of tragic drama produced by any of the English Romantics, although most of them tried, and also, it may be, the last English verse tragedy of a traditional kind with a serious claim on our attention. Meanwhile, Martyn Corbett's *Byron and Tragedy* ought to alert readers and potential directors alike to the richness of this dramatic legacy.

Trinity College, Cambridge ANNE BARTON

Preface

Of the major English poets between Dryden and Yeats, only Byron bears the marks of a substantial dramatist. In the years between 1816 and 1822, he composed seven poetic dramas and commenced an eighth. Each of those works has a serious intellectual content, shows considerable formal accomplishment and has a decided innovatory tendency. Byron, alone of the Romantic and Victorian poets who wrote or attempted to write drama, had a first-hand knowledge of the theatre. He had shown considerble interest in the theatre from his youth and had served on the Subcommittee of Management of Drury Lane during 1815. Moreover, though he insisted that his dramas were not written for the stage but for what he called 'the mental theatre of the reader' (BLJ 8 110), between 1830 and 1887 four of these works enjoyed some theatrical success in a number of revivals on the London, provincial and American stage [1] and one, Werner, became 'a permanent feature on the metropolitan playbills' [2] for at least part of that period. Macready, Phelps and Irving all gave memorable performances of the eponymous role.

These circumstances suggest that Byron, if not a major dramatist should rank in critical opinion with other important poet-dramatists: with Webster say, or Marlowe, or Dryden himself. Yet, the reverse is true. Byron's dramas are neglected, both in performance and by critics. Steiner's comment on the reputation of these dramas is most apt. He wrote, in 1961: 'Today Byron's dramas are hardly ever performed and they are dismissed by most critics as ambitious failures.' [3] A quarter of a century later, whilst there have been signs of an awakening of interest in the dramas, especially by a group of American scholars to whose work I will make frequent reference, the position has scarcely changed.

This remarkable phenomenon is the subject of this study. Some years of close acquaintance with the works have led me to conclude that they are important in themselves and, by a close textual commentary, I hope to indicate their importance both in Byron's *oeuvre* and in English dramatic literature. Byron himself was convinced that they ranked with his greatest works and that posterity would value them above his others. Hitherto, this claim has not been taken seriously by Byron scholarship. My purpose is to examine it. It is my view that Byron is considerably diminished as an artist

unless his dramas are given the attention his satirical and narrative works enjoy. I propose to establish him as a distinctive and important tragic poet whose dramas display those metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic conceptions central to his art. He may most properly be admired as a comic poet but his *Weltanshauung* is essentially tragic:

> And if I laugh at any mortal thing,
> 'T is that I may not weep; and if I weep,
> 'T is that our nature cannot always bring
> Itself to apathy, for we must steep
> Our hearts first in the depths of Lethe's spring,
> Ere what we least wish to behold will sleep. (DJ IV iv)

In this way, I hope to add this study to that faint but by now perceptible critical literature which, since Chew's 1915 monograph[4], has attempted to re-examine and reassess these works.

Many people have helped me in the preparation and composition of this study. My thanks are due to Kenneth Parker for his astute and encouraging tutorial advice; to Anne Barton for her careful and rigorous supervision of my research and her many personal kindnesses. Both of these showed faith in me which sustained me over the long period of my project. They had also to read a great quantity of inferior composition, now happily discarded. I also owe thanks to my friends Bruce Roser and Malcolm Easton for their help in supporting my application for research registration; to the academic and administrative staff of the North East London Polytechnic; to the staffs of the London, Westminster and British Libraries and the Bodleian for their patience and courtesy at all times; to John Larkworthy and the staff at the Wallace Collection; to Paul Edwards for his interest and suggestions; to Anne Stephenson for coping with the typing of my often cramped and inaccurate manuscript and to her son Anthony for his efficient and diligent messenger service; to Kathleen Hughes and my teaching colleagues for their support and interest; to Martin Gomberg and Surinder Johal for their advice on the mysteries of the word processor: to Gaby Parker for her warm hospitality at often inconvenient times; to Frances Arnold for her advice and encouragement, and to Keith Povey for his invaluable assistance.

Last, but far from least, I owe so much to three women: my late

mother for her struggle to educate me and for having presented me with the works of Byron for my fifteenth birthday, my aunt, Kathleen Elwin Corbett, for having awakened and sustained in me an interest in Romantic literature, and my dear wife Jenny for her patience, forbearance, encouragement and support at all times and for her help with proof-reading.

MARTYN CORBETT

Abbreviations

Throughout, for convenience, I have used the following abbreviations. Any reference to any of these works is placed in parentheses in the text itself. All other citations appear in the notes which follow (see note on citation on page 217). For simplicity, I have not punctuated text citations.

Coleridge's edition of the works: CPW + volume no. (Arabic) + page no.

Single volume edition of poetry: PW + page no.

Prothero's edition of letters and journals: LJ + volume no. (Arabic) + page no.

Marchand's edition of the letters and journals: BLJ + volume no. (Arabic) + page no.

References to footnotes in the texts of these works will be effected by using a lower case 'n', followed by the number of the note as given in the text.

Publication details of the above works are given in the Bibliographical Note (p.217).

References to Byron's Text

Throughout I have, wherever possible, used Coleridge's text for the works and Marchand's for the letters and journals. For convenience, I have employed the following abbreviations:

MAN *Manfred*: MF *Marino Faliero*: SARD *Sardanapalus*: 2F *The Two Foscari*: HE *Heaven and Earth*: WER *Werner*: DT *The Deformed Transformed*: CH *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: DJ *Don Juan*: V of J *The Vision of Judgement*.

Contents

1

Introduction

Byron was a very special kind of dramatist – *a tragic poet*. A realisation of his stature as a tragic poet is essential to an understanding of his art. Because his dramas have been misunderstood and understudied, the nature of Byron's art has been misrepresented. The tragic vision he propounds in the dramas, and particularly in that remarkable series of related tragedies which he wrote in Ravenna, is at the centre of his thought. Its bleak pessimism, balanced by a stoical affirmation of human dignity; its unflinching reluctance to accept political, ethical or theological emollients to the human predicament – revolutionary idealism, the practice of individual benevolence or civic virtue, social meliorism, the pursuit of knowledge, the hope of redemption – balanced by a genuine respect for these solutions; its acute sense of evil operating through human and superhuman agencies; of Man's destiny being determined by hostile forces, transcendental or mundane, which cannot be resisted, but must constantly be defied; its presentation of the corrosiveness and oppressiveness of human institutions – the state, the tribe, the family – which imprison the human spirit though operated by decent men, loving fathers, benevolent angels; all these contribute to a tragic repose, a perfectly poised paradox, unique in English literature at this time. It is this which is the unifying principle of the tragedies and their most valuable contribution to English Romantic culture.

They were the product of what I believe can correctly be called Byron's tragic period. With the exception of *Manfred* which, as will be shown, was the intellectual prototype for the rest, all the dramas were written between the spring of 1820 and that of 1822. Indeed, five of them, the group beginning with *Sardanapalus* and ending with *Werner*, were written in almost continuous sequence. Their inspiration and the sources upon which they drew were generally foreign – Venetian history, the tragedies of Alfieri, the *Sturm and Drang* drama of Schiller, Goethe's *Faust*, Gessner's *Der Tod Abels*, Greek historians, the lyric tragedies of Aeschylus. Moreover, Byron stressed their foreignness, pointing out in letter after letter that he

was deliberately establishing an alternative drama to that of Shakespeare and what he called 'the older dramatists' (see below). Part of Byron's impulse was self-consciously to dissent from the prevalent critical attitudes of his time. To some extent this may have been a characteristic and studied provocation, drawing attention to himself by taking an attitude which he knew would irritate, anger, outrage, but this should not be overstressed. Byron was a radical and completely serious artist, well equipped for literary innovation – *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* are both highly innovative works. Moreover, he had thought penetratingly about the perceptible decline of English drama and offered regular form and simplified rhetoric as prescriptions for reform.

Byron is and has always been a much misunderstood artist. These creative impulses were almost universally misunderstood by his contemporaries. A substantial example of this misunderstanding is offered by examining briefly the reaction is one of them, possibly the most distinguished and influential, to Byron's attempt to write in Neoclassical form.

Writing to Murray in February 1821, while composing *Sardanapalus*, Byron gave the following modest statement of his intentions: 'It appears to me that there is room for a different style of the drama – neither a servile following of the old drama – which is a grossly erroneous one – nor yet *too French* – like those who succeeded the older writers'. (BLJ 8 78). The impulses which prompted this view of the drama arose from a variety of causes but principally I believe from Byron's conviction that the 'grossly erroneous' style of the 'older dramatists' – presumably Shakespeare and the other Renaissance playwrights [1] whose works were so admired and copied at this time – had brought about the degeneration of English drama. This decay was in itself a symptom of what he took to be a more general deterioration in English life and culture. Byron had a chronic sense that something had been lost. This, is a recurrent motif in the dramas themselves. His 'different style of drama' was offered as a social as well as a literary restorative. This intention is implicit in the polemics of the Bowles dispute which had attracted his attention during the autumn of 1820. In the first of the two letters which were his late contributions to the protracted dispute between Thomas Campbell and William Bowles on the poetic merits of Pope, he lamented the state of England as he then perceived it:

> The truth is, that in these days, the grand 'primum mobile' of England is *cant*; *cant* political, *cant* poetical, *cant* moral; but always

> *cant*, multiplied through all the varieties of life. I say cant, because it is a thing of words, without the smallest influence upon human actions; the English being no wiser, no better, and much poorer, and more divided among themselves, as well as far less moral, than they were before the prevalence of this verbal decorum.
>
> (LJ 5 542)

What had been lost and replaced with this ubiquitous cant is something unspecified which inhabited the world of Pope. In a letter to Octavius Gilchrist, one of Campbell's pro-Pope allies, Byron made this clear:

> I look upon a proper appreciation of Pope as a touchstone of taste – and the present question as not only whether Pope is or is not in the first rank of our literature – but whether *that* literature shall or shall not relapse into the Barbarism from which it had scarcely emerged for above a century and a half.
>
> (BLJ 8 200)

The historical perspective is interesting; the beginnings of the emergence from 'Barbarism' dated approximately from the Restoration, when the French Neoclassical style became prevalent in England. Herbert Read claimed that Byron wrote dramas in this style 'in order to prove the validity of Pope's ideals in all categories of poetry'.[2]

I have no doubt this was one of several influences, even a predominant one. Byron's advocacy of Pope became most absolute at the same time as he was composing his Ravenna dramas. What Byron took to be desirable in Pope's style assumed for him, at this time, an ethical significance. Elsewhere in the Bowles letters, he makes this remarkable claim for Pope: 'He is the moral poet of all civilization, and, as such, let us hope that he will one day be the national poet of mankind' (LJ 5 560). His advocacy of Pope is no longer the result of a mere aesthetic preference, but of an ideological commitment. In the light of this, it is hardly surprising that, when he turned to drama at this time, he should have chosen Neoclassical form which, though never used by Pope, would, in Byron's analysis anyway, have recommended itself to 'the moral poet of all civilization'.

Despite this, the tone of his February letter to Murray is tentative. He does not offer his 'different style' as a replacement for, but as

a complement to, the older works. The reticence of the verbal phrase and the rational balance of the syntax moderate the confident and provocative 'grossly erroneous'. When, however, he came to write the Preface to *Sardanapalus*, he assumed a tone of languid pugnacity, that pre-empted the hostile reaction it received:

> The Author . . . attempted to preserve and . . . to approach, the 'unities'; conceiving that with any very distant departure from them, there may be poetry, but there can be no drama. He is aware of the unpopularity of this notion in present English literature; but it is not a system of his own, being merely an opinion, which, not very long ago, was the law of literature throughout the world, and is still so in the most civilized parts of it. But 'nous avons changé tout cela', and are reaping the advantages of the change. The writer is far from conceiving that any thing he can adduce by personal precept or example can at all approach his regular, or even irregular predecessors: he is merely giving a reason why he preferred the more regular formation of a structure, however feeble, to an entire abandonment of all rules whatsoever. Where he has failed, the failure is in the architect, – and not in the art.
>
> (CPW 5 9)

The modesty Byron adopts here is not tentative but taunting. The Preface is censorious, tendentious and, what is worse, apparently Anglophobic. In comparing English taste unfavourably with 'the law of literature . . . in the most civilized parts of the world', he is offering a gratuitious insult to his native land. He had clearly gone foreign. That did not endear him to his countrymen, not known for their cosmopolitan sentiments. It is also worth noting that the Preface is brief to the point of curtness. The extract cited is well over half the published text. As *Sardanapalus* was published with *Cain* and *The Two Foscari*, it might seem that there were other matters to comment upon than his use of the Unities. If critics saw his use of these as frivolous, Byron had himself to blame. What was a conscious, well-considered and serious aesthetic strategy is made to sound like a peevish whim.[3]

This is not the place to speculate upon the motives for this strange, but entirely characteristic, attitude. It is the result, not the motive, which concerns us here. One result was an article in the *Edinburgh Review* by the magisterial Francis Jeffrey. This critic had, since he

had praised *Childe Harold* I and II, been an enthusiastic supporter of Byron's work. But, in the February edition of the review, in a lengthy survey of *Sardanapalus* and its companion dramas, together with a retrospect on the then-published cantos of *Don Juan*, he turned from praise to censure. Byron had clearly gone too far:

> From the very first, he must have been aware that he offended the principles and shocked the prejudices of the majority, by his sentiments, as much as he delighted them by his talents. Yet there never was an author so universally and so warmly applauded, so gently admonished – so kindly entreated to look more heedfully to his opinions. He took the praise, as usual, and rejected the advice. As he grew in fame and authority, he aggravated all his offences – clung more fondly to all that he had been reproached with – and only took leave of Childe Harold to ally himself to Don Juan.[4]

Jeffrey was less hostile to *Sardanapalus* which, he admitted, had 'interest' and 'beauties', but he used it and its companions to illustrate the decline of English drama. He observed that, as things stood, 'men of great name and great talent have occasionally adventured into this once fertile field, they . . . reaped no laurels, and left no trophies behind them'.[5] Byron, it seems, was mistaken in attempting the drama.

As part of his comments on *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari*, he turned to Byron's use of the Unities. What follows is a clear response to the truculent tone of Byron's Preface. I quote the passage at some length:

> As to Lord Byron's pretending to set up the *Unities* at this time of day, as 'the law of literature throughout the world', it is mere caprice and contradiction. He, if ever man was, is *a law unto himself* – 'a chartered libertine'; – and now, when he is tired of this unbridled license [sic], he wants to do penance within the *Unities*! This certainly looks very like affectation; or, if there is anything sincere in it, the motive must be, that, by getting rid of so much story and action, in order to simplify the plot and bring it within the prescribed limits, he may fill up the blank spaces with long discussions, and have nearly all the talk to himself! For ourselves, we will confess that we have a considerable contempt for these same *Unities*, ever since we read Dennis's *Criticism on Cato* in our boyhood – except indeed the unity of action, which Lord Byron does not appear to set much store by.

> Dr Johnson, we conceive, has pretty well settled this question: and if Lord Byron chuses [sic] to grapple with him, he will find that he requires a stronger arm than that with which he puts down our Laureates. We shall only add, that when the moderns tie themselves down to write tragedies of the same length, and on the same simple plan, in other respects, with those of Sophocles and Aeschylus, we shall not object to their adhering to the Unities; for there can, in that case, be no sufficient inducement for violating them. But, in the mean time, we hold that English dramatic poetry soars above the *Unities*, just as the imagination does.[6]

This, and the rest of the comments on *Sardanapalus*, tells us little enough about the dramas: the piece is, in the style of its time, a series of more or less urbane judgements about the work with little that we would today take for analysis. But it does tell us much about the interaction between Byron and one of his more distinguished colleagues. Whether or not Jeffrey had understood Byron's aesthetic purpose in *Sardanapalus*, he had certainly received the message of the Preface. More to the point, because of this interaction between critic and author, a context was created in which the work was judged then, and has been judged since. It is not only the fault of men like Jeffrey that Byron's tragedies are still underrated; Byron's own predominant personality, together with the rumour, anecdote and speculation that he himself generated, blocks the light of clear evaluation. As Keith Walker neatly puts it: 'by the 1820's Byron had become so much a legend that it wasn't possible to write about him as a man without writing about his poetry. Byron's poems were sources for his life.'[7]

Jeffrey's comments do not, it seems to me, arise from a judgement of the drama, but from an attitude towards the man, provoked, on the one hand, by his exasperation at Byron's continuing to shock 'the prejudices of the majority', and, on the other, to provoke disputation by the tone of the preface to the *Sardanapalus* volume. So Byron is characterised as a reformed libertine and his adherence to the Unities is seen as a penitential act; sexual morality becomes conflated with aesthetic preference. But he is not only 'a chartered libertine', he is a capricious nobleman whose choice is a mere insincere whim or, what is worse, a clumsy device to allow him to 'have nearly all the talk to himself'. He is either insincere or incompetent. Moreover, he is something of a bully too, prepared and equipped to deal with the small fry of literature, 'our Laureates', presumably the Lake poets for whom Jeffrey himself entertained little time.[8]