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BYRON'S DRAMAS

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BYRON'S DRAMAS

The place we are to give in our hearts or our esteem to Byron's dramas has always been a matter of differing opinion. In his own day, such orthodox critics as Jeffrey and Bishop Heber, while according them certain great qualities, judge them, we might think, on grounds that are often solid enough, but equally often irrelevant: on the other hand, Lockhart and Wilson give them such unstinted praise, as we in our turn may feel to be too uncritical. Bulwer Lytton regarded them as the best things that Byron ever wrote,([1]) and in our own day, Professor Wilson Knight, in his brilliant essay in *The Burning Oracle* has embraced them wholeheartedly. For the most part, however, commentators have judged them harshly, even finding them 'unreadable', though now and again we hear a wilderness-crying voice pleading that they should have a place in our national repertory. What I on my part would wish to do on this occasion is to try to fit them into a Byronic pattern, and also, as far as may be, to appraise them as actable drama, aware of what would normally militate against them as such. I will say at the outset that in a sense I am inclined to agree with Lytton, for it seems to me that in some of his plays Byron is expressing more poignantly than anywhere else what he most deeply feels: and I suggest that he chose the drama as being the most concentrated form available to his self-searching genius. Perhaps the doing freed him for the writing of *Don Juan.*

I feel it necessary in the first place to note at what period of his life they were written, for this is of primary significance. *Manfred,* begun in Switzerland in the summer of 1816, when Byron had left England for good soon after the disastrous collapse of his marriage, was finished in the spring of the next year, when he had moved to Venice. It was not until four years later that he embarked upon the actual writing of *Marino Faliero.* In the mean time he had published—among other things, such as *Mazeppa*—the third and fourth Cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* markedly different in tone from the first two; *Beppu,* and the first two Cantos of the work he could refer to,

with characteristic assumed carelessness, as *Donny Johnny*. Emergence from the pit? Yet when in the autumn of 1818 Shelley paid him a visit in Venice, the younger poet felt impelled to write *Julian and Maddalo,* to wit, Shelley and Byron. In his Preface he describes Maddalo as consumed by concentrated and impatient feelings, trampling on his own hopes and affections. What, in that fine and terrible poem Shelley tells us about Byron may well be read as an illuminating gloss on the most striking of Byron's plays. It is clear that during the period he was brooding over and writing them, Byron was prey to the most intense emotions of pride, regret, and remorse. More than one of his characters might utter from Part III of *Childe Harold:*

> There is a very life in our despair,
> Vitality of poison—a quick root
> That feeds these deadly branches; for it were
> As nothing that we die; but Life will suit
> Itself to sorrow's most detested fruit,
> Like to the apples on the Dead Sea's shore
> All ashes to the taste. (St. xxxiv)

Luckily there was a vitality other than poison, a rapturous response to the beauty of multifarious existence that nourished the branches of Byron's abundantly creative tree.

As we all know, Byron was emphatic in stating that his dramas were designed without the remotest notion of production, his 'intercourse' with Drury Lane—as one of the Committee of Management—having given him, he declared, 'the greatest contempt' for the theatre. *Manfred,* he insisted, he composed 'actually with a *horror* of the stage, and with a view to render the thought of it impracticable', (it was, however, acted at Covent Garden in 1834), and he was furiously annoyed when *Marino Faliero*—clumsily adapted—was put on at Drury Lane in April, 1821, soon after its publication. Nevertheless they offer tempting possibilities as stage plays, and some are occasionally embodied; for instance *The Two Foscari* at the Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich, *Marino Faliero* by a society in London a few years ago, and *Cain* in Edinburgh. *Werner* at one time enjoyed considerable popularity with Macready as Werner, while *Sardanapalus* had a vogue in Germany enthusiastically supported by Kaiser Wilhelm II. If a wish to consider them as viable drama may seem impertinent to the memory of Lord Byron, one may plead in excuse a profound admiration for his far-ranging genius.

Byron's plays, we have to recognize from the outset, are philosophic statements, they are *about* something, some dominating idea, though they are divisible into two groups, which I might call the 'supernatural' and the 'human'. This is apparent from what he entitled them. *Manfred* he called 'a dramatic poem', *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* he classified as 'mysteries', using the mediaeval name for plays dealing with Biblical events. *The Deformed Transformed,* to be sure, though the Devil plays an active part in it, he dubbed simply 'a drama'. But this play has less profoundly philosophic thought in it than have the others, also less poetry, and one may, with Shelley, like it the least of all the things that Byron had written. It was never finished. The, other plays, called 'tragedies', are peopled wholly by human beings. Although it is with these that I shall chiefly be concerned (I can deal with only one of them at all fully), the others cannot be ignored, since they would seem to state in direct terms ideas that in the 'human' plays remain as implications.

I shall begin then with *Manfred.* This, though 'supernatural' seems to have inspired, in varying degrees, the 'human' plays. Byron called it 'a kind of Poem in dialogue (in blank verse) or Drama . . . but of a very wild, metaphysical, and inexplicable kind' (To Murray, 15 Feb. 1817). Manfred himself is the personification of metaphysical questing rather than a person. 'Tormented by a species of remorse', he is obsessed by his craving for knowledge of ultimate things—the meaning of life, of death, for a solution also of the problem of evil, crying out, as others in later plays will echo:

> Must crimes be punish'd but by other crimes,
> And greater criminals ? (III. iv.)

And through various mouths in nearly all the plays we find, though modified as to the conclusion, Manfred's utterance:

> We are the fools of time and terror; Days
> Steal on us and steal from us; yet we live,
> Loathing our life, and dreading still to die.
> (II. ii.)

He himself longs to die, but, mysteriously,

> There is a power upon me which withholds
> And makes it my fatality to live;
>
> (I. ii.)

a theme illustrated by the Chamois Hunter clutching him as he is about to throw himself off a cliff. And again, in expressing his dilemma to Astarte:

> . . . hitherto all hateful things conspire
> To bind me in existence, in a life
> Which makes me shrink from immortality—
> A future like the past.
>
> (II. iv.)

Longing for forgetfulness, he appeals to the Spirits:

> Oblivion, self-oblivion-
> Can ye not wring from out the hidden realms
> Ye offer so profusely what I ask ?
>
> (I. i.)

But 'What is death? Is there immortality'? were questions always haunting Byron; In his Detached Thoughts of 27 Nov. 1813, he had written:

> I see no such horror in a 'dreamless sleep', and I have no conception of any existence which duration would not render tiresome.

At this later stage, the word 'tiresome' would seem a mockery, for:

> The innate tortures of that deep despair,
> Which is remorse without the fear of hell,
> But is in all sufficient in itself
> Would make a hell of heaven.
>
> (III. i.)

Moreover, there is no power in a holy man that 'can exorcise

> From out the unbounded spirit that quick sense
> of its own sins, wrongs, sufferance and revenge
> Upon itself ; there is no future pang
> Can deal that justice on the self-condemn'd
> He deals on his own soul.
>
> (Ibid.)

And it might be felt that, in the other plays, most of the main characters that perish might murmcr Manfred's last words: "Old man! 'Tis not so difficult to die," which, Byron said, contained 'the whole effect and moral of the poem'.

'Of the poem'. And poem it is, rather than drama, a magnificent poem, rich with impassioned passages. The only human being in the whole phantasmagorical piece is the Abbott, the servants being merely stage carpentry, the

Chamois Hunter as abstract as Manfred himself. The 'characters' otherwise are the spirits whom Manfred summons by his magic—the Destinies, the Spirits, Arimanes, the Witch of the Alps, and the phantom of Astarte.([2]) The whole is splendidly lyrical, apart from the actual songs of the Spirits and Destinies, glowing with superb Alpine colouring in passages often versified renderings of parts of the Journal he sent to Mrs Leigh. It is where it becomes largely 'human' drama in the last part that it falls a little flat, and we need to relish it as a poem cousin to *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound* rather than partake in it as a drama.

Many of the metaphysical themes are resumed in *Heaven and Earth,* surely one of Byron's neglected masterpieces. But this 'mystery', with all the moving qualities of a sustained narrative poem hardly comes within my scope here. *Cain* is, partly, another matter. Unactable, yes, I think. The very long duologue the whole of Act II, between Cain and Lucifer in the unbounded regions of the illimitable and often gloomy universe would surely drive an audience to distraction or protest though it renders actual the answers to the questions raised by Manfred: What is death? And why? What is the origin of evil, and what divine justice? In common with Manfred, Cain is outraged that the Tree of Knowledge should not be the Tree of Life. Yet this mixed drama has great dramatic moments on the 'human' side, as when Cain and Adah bend over the cradle of their son Enoch, a beautifully tender scene (III. i.), or the really dramatic passage, emotion fulfilling itself in action, where Cain, the live, enquiring, gentle if rebellious being is goaded to smite his brother, by the injustice, as he sees it, of God, and by Abel's—not to say Adam's—hideous complacency. And with these comments I must leave the 'supernatural' dramas and turn to the 'human' ones.

The writing of *Manfred* evidently stirred Byron's dramatic instincts, for before it was finished he wrote to Murray for a transcript of Moore's account of the Doge Falieri, saying 'I mean to make a tragedy of the subject'. Warned by Murray of a possible parallel in *Venice Preserved,* he replied that he enormously admired Otway's play except for 'that maudlin bitch of chaste lewdness and blubbering curiosity, Belvidera, whom I utterly despise, abhor and detest'.

> But [he goes on] the story of Marino Falieri is different, and I think so much finer, that I wish Otway had taken it instead: the head conspiring against the body for a refusal of redress of a real injury . . . the devil himself could not have a finer subject, and he is your only tragic dramatist.

That was in April, 1817; but it was not until April 1820 that Byron began to write his 'historical tragedy', which occupied him for three and a half months.

Before going further into this cursory examination of Byron's plays, it might be useful to note that they all conform to a pattern set to a large degree by *Manfred.* From that poem alone we can see that, as Jeffrey said, 'his great gifts are exquisite tenderness and demoniacal sublimity'. His women, certainly, giving body to the shadow figure of Astarte, are infinitely good, almost too good to be true, devoted, gentle, yet endowed with an inner toughness of humane balance that offsets the 'demoniacal' nature of the men. The latter, because, we may think, of the Maddalo-like mood dominating Byron at this period, are all extreme, possessed, even obsessed, by one idea.

So much inadequately, for what we might call the emotional and philosophic core of Byron's dramas: what of the way the gripping ideas are given actuality? Already in *Manfred,* 'a kind of dialogue . . . or drama' we remember, we see an addiction to philosophic duologues,—which in the 'human' plays often infuriatingly hold up the action—and the failure to control an impulse towards descriptive lyrical outbursts. In that poem, to be sure, the duologues are not excessively spun out, and the lyrical passages, such as the address to the sun (III. ii.), are in keeping. Yet it is disturbing suddenly to be plunged into a rhapsody on the Coliseum (III. iv), so distant from the Alps where the play is set. This, one feels, is sheer self-indulgence on Byron's part. It is certainly magnificent, worthy of comparison with the famous stanzas in *Childe Harold,* but to obtrude it here merely distracts the readers' train of emotion.

The principles that guided Byron in constructing his dramas are indicated in his letters to Murray. Writing of *Sardanapalus* as he sent it to him, he says:

> You will find this very *un*like Shakespeare; and so much the better in one sense, for I look upon him to be the *worst* of models, though the most extraordinary of writers. It has been my object to be as simple and severe as Alfieri, and I have broken down the *poetry* as nearly I could to common language. (14 July, 1821).

And a week later: 'Mind the unities, which are my great object of research, and he had said earlier in *Don Juan:*

> as I have a high sense
> Of Aristotle and the Rules, 'tis fit
> To beg his pardon if I err a bit,
> (I. cxx.)

He was 'aware of the unpopularity of the notion' (Preface to *Sardanapalus),* but he would read the English 'a moral lesson'.

This adherence to the unities, especially of time, is one of the particularities of Byron's plays. Bishop Heber asked, if the plays were meant only to be read, what did the unities matter? But that is beside the question, for when we read we become, if we have any imagination, veritable spectators; and what causes discomfort in the reader is apt to cause failure in the theatre. The point of the unities is to avoid too far straining the sense of verisimilitude of an audience, which was Sidney's argument for respecting them; and if adherence to them creates the strain, as it is often does with Byron, then their object is defeated.

Byron had not thought deeply enough here, for structure is not so mechanical as the word might imply. It is no formal casing, but the structure of emotions built up in the spectator (or reader) as the events develop. Moreover, what is essential is variation in tension, change of pace, expectation or suspense, all the while the sense that something is happening that might have happened.

Marino Faliero opens superbly; our expectations are aroused, and almost at once we sense the hideous tension that grips the Doge as he waits to hear what sentence 'the Forty' have passed on the patrician youth, Michel Steno. But for what? An audience will want to know. A reader, possibly, can wait, but in the theatre any effect must be immediate. The Doge, however, prevents his nephew Bertuccio from telling them just as he is about to do so. They will feel baffled, though readers can learn—and only then from an editor's footnote—that this outrageous young man had scribbled on the back of a chair at a Carnival festival: 'The Wife of Marino Faliero—others embrace her; he maintains her.' Without knowing this an audience will not be able to enter into the Doge's literally shattering fury when he is told that Steno, for an offence that he thinks

merits death, has been sentenced merely to a month's house-arrest. And readers and audience alike only learn gradually that the Doge had married a woman young enough to be his daughter—the daughter, indeed, of his oldest friend —so they can understand the prior outburst:

> You know the full offence of this born villain,
> This creeping, coward, rank, acquitted felon,
> Who threw his sting into a poisonous libel,
> And on the honour of—oh God!—my wife.
> (I. ii.)

Then our bewilderment—bewilderment rather than expectation—is cleared up.

From the moment lie hears the sentence the Doge becomes an obsessed person. His emotion, not the plot against Venice, is the guiding interest of the drama, and it becomes enthralling. At first he almost collapses, and has to be supported by his nephew; but when the latter offers to kill Steno, the Doge deters him. The crime is no longer his, but that of 'the Forty'. A life so vile as Steno's is 'nothing at this hour'; in the olden days 'Great expiations had a hecatomb'. The notion brings apparent calm; he apologises for his anger, and Bertuccio exclaims:

> Why, that's my uncle!
> The leader, and the statesman and the chief
> Of commonwealths, and sovereign of himself.
> (I. ii.)

But the younger Faliero has hardly gone when Israel Bertuccio, chief of the arsenal, is announced; and the Doge, all too readily to carry conviction, joins in an already conveniently prepared plot to overthrow the rulers and massacre them all. This contraction of time strains our credulity; it all comes too pat. Yet as the rather lengthily protracted scene proceeds we enter into the Doge's state of mind. He has been a great soldier, defeating the 'Huns' at Zara, and a supremely successful ambassador; but on becoming Doge he has found. that his power is but a pageant which he is dressed up to head, 'a thing of robes and trinkets'. The patrician government has become 'an o'ergrown aristocratic Hydra,

> The poisonous heads of whose envenom'd body
> Have breathed a pestilence upon us all.
> (I. ii.)

He will free Venice, avenge its wrongs, and become its acclaimed benevolent ruler. The plot, which in actual history took many months to contrive, is tied up in a twinkling. From now on, however, the Doge is torn by an inner conflict that fascinates us. No sooner has Israel gone out than he groans:

> At midnight. . . . I repair—
> To what ? to hold a council in the dark
> With common ruffians leagued to ruin states.
> (I. ii.)

And at night, under the shadow of the monuments of his ancestors, Doges also, he bursts out to Israel:

> Deem'st thou the souls of such a race as mine
> Can rest, when he, their last descendant chief,
> Stands plotting on the brink of their pure graves
> With stung plebeians ?

He is 'trampling on his own affections', and when Israel asks him, 'Do you repent?' he answers:

> No—but I feel, and shall do to the last.
> I cannot quench a glorious life at once,
> Nor dwindle to the thing that I must be.
> (III. i.)

The agony of his deed assails him later when the massacre has been organised by the plotters. As they rejoice at the idea of a bloody revenge for their wrongs, he implies that it is easy for them to kill patricians, but:

> All these men were my friends: I loved them, they
> Requited honourably my regards;
> We served and fought; we smiled and wept in concert;
> We revell'd or we sorrowed side by side;
> We made alliances of blood and marriage;
> We grew in years and honours fairly . . . .
> Oime! Oime!—and must I do this deed?
> (III. ii.)

And later in this magnificent, moving, but again too long scene, lie says:

> think not I waver;
> Ah! no; it is the certainty of all
> Which I must do doth make me tremble thus.

And finally, taking up a point of Israel's:

> And thou (lost well to answer that it was
> "Mv own free will and act", and yet you err,
> For I *will* do this! Doubt not—fear not: I
> Will be your most unmerciful accomplice!
> And yet I act no more on my free will
> Nor my own feelings—both compel me back;
> But there is *hell* within me and around,
> And like the demon who believes and trembles
> Must I abhor and do.

From that moment, I believe, a spectator would be *with* the Doge; a reader certainly is. We are on tenterhooks with him when he expects the bells of St. Mark's to toll as the signal for the rebellion to begin, a signal intolerably delayed, and then stopped when it has hardly begun. We are with him in the dignity of his last hours, when he is to be executed, and finds, like Manfred, that it is not too difficult to die; when he explains, but cannot justify his acts:

> A spark creates the flame—'tis the last drop
> Which makes the cup run o'er, and mine was full
> Already;
>
> (V. i.)

or when he says:

> And yet I find a comfort in
> The thought that these things are the work of Fate;
> For I would rather yield to gods than men.
>
> (V. ii.)

We even sympathise with his accurately prophetic curse on Venice (V. iii.).

But to be at one with the hero to the extent that we can be in the theatre is not enough, and the general conduct of the piece as a stage play, either seen or read, is a little halting. Byron is too given to long duologues, such as compose the first two acts, and the soliloquies become trying to the patience. We want to get on; we are eager to *see* what happens; when geared up to expectation we do not want to be baffled. The greatest offence in that respect in *Marino Faliero* is when Lioni, who is to be the active instrument in foiling the plot, indulges in a three-page rhapsody on the beauties of Venice (IV. i). It is a fine piece of vivid descriptive poetry, but more than irrelevant, and is unnecessary either to our understanding of Lioni or to the progress of the play. Jeffrey put the objections to Byron's methods cogently enough:

> A drama is not merely a dialogue, but an *action;* and necessarily supposes that something is to pass before the eyes of the assembled spectators . . . Its style should be calculated to excite the emotions, and keep alive the attention of gazing multitudes.
> (Edinburgh Review, xxxvi. Discussing the Preface to *Sardanapalus.)*

Drama *is* action, not merely something being talked about; and though, of course, thought promotes the action, it must be allowed time to do so. The other characters are deftly sketched in, especially Bertram, who by his humane revulsions against wholesale, indiscriminate massacre—previously revealed to us—and warning, as he thinks, one friend only, namely Lioni, betrays the traitors.

Angiolina, the Doge's young wife, is the perfect heroine of Byronic drama. Secure in herself, she wishes Steno to be left to his own shame, and when her friend Marianna says: "Some sacrifice is due to slandered virtue", she answers, "Why, what is virtue if it needs a victim?" We may feel that she too absurdly innocent, for when Marianna asks her if she has never thought that some younger man might not make a better husband for her, she replies blandly:

> I knew not
> That wedded bosoms could permit themselves To
> ponder upon what they *now* might choose
> (II. i.)

But this conversation gives us, for the first time in the play, some change in tension, and her succeeding dialogue with the Doge allows us to see him more three-dimensionally. On meeting her he tries for the moment to be less overwrought. "How fares it with you?" he asks,

> . . . have you been abroad?
> The day is overcast, but the calm wave
> Favours the gondolier's light skimming oar:
> Or have you held a levee of your friends?
> Or has your music made you solitary?

But she will not be deflected. She insists on knowing what is agitating her husband who she sees to be suffering a terrible strain. And in the long duologue which follows, she, though herself magnificently proud, taxes him gently, but justly, with inordinate pride. In the final scenes, where again she is all dignity, she reveals real feeling, supporting her husband's, here, she feels, admirable pride:

Then die, Faliero! since it must be so;
But with the spirit of my father's friend.
Thou has been guilty of a great offence
Half-cancell'd by the harshness of these men.
I would have sued to them—have pray'd to them—
Have begged as famish'ed mendicants for bread—
Have wept as they will cry unto their God
For mercy, and be answer'd as they answer—
Had it been fitting for thy name or mine . . .
(V. i.)

Real feeling, yes, but no passionate love; it is patriarchal on the one hand, dutifully filial on the other. For at this stage Byron, here again reacting against the theatre of his day, would not admit passionate love as a pivot in tragedy.

But on 13th January, 1821, after talking to the Countess Guiccioli, he wrote in his Diary:

> She quarelled with me, because I said that love was not the loftiest theme for true tragedy; and having the advantage of her native language, and natural female eloquence, she overcame my fewer arguments, I believe she was right. I must put more love in 'Sardanapalus'.

On the same day he wrote the opening lines of that 'tragedy'. This play, though as little written for the stage as was *Marino Faliero,* would seem far more actable. In a letter to Murray on 22nd July, telling him to print away and to publish, he said:

> I think they must own I have more styles than one. 'Sardanapalus' is however, almost a comic character; but for that matter, so is Richard II.

Certainly, as though Byron's self-trampling mood were for the moment assuaged, there is a much more easy flow in this play, more varied tension, than there was in the last. We come to the end of *Marino Faliero* with a real feeling of tragedy; something fine has been broken by something meaner than itself; there is in it a ritual element, the sense of sacrifice, that we get in all great tragedy. This is absent from *Sardanapalus,* which is, one might say, rather a glorious story: the holocaust that the Emperor decrees for his end is, in its way, magnificent. But do we pity? We admire, rather, him and those willing to share his fate.

On the other hand it is first-rate theatre, though not altogether free from the improbabilities that Byron flouted by his insistence on the unities, here of place, which he pushed to an extreme avoided in the other plays, so that armies do

battle in a dining-room ; and also to some extent of time, which compelled him to a long explanatory monologue at the outset of the play. Otherwise there is nothing to over-strain our capacity for suspension of disbelief for the moment. Sardanapalus himself is readily understandable; he alone among Byron's heroes, though unrestrained, is not prey to an obsession. He is an extreme voluptuary, certainly, but not devoid of common sense; and his pacifist Emperor, hating bloodshed, can be roused to military valour, while his final immolation on the pyre is glorious self-assertion, and no morbid death-wish, or desire for oblivion.

We can enter also into the other characters; the plain, ambitious soldier Arbaces, likeable in his moment of generous gratitude, checked by the more realistic Chaldean priest, Beleses; especially we can feel for Salamenes, that alert, eminently practical servant of the state, loyal to it and to Sardanapalus, in spite of the shabby treatment dealt out to the queen, his sister. The characters are well, but not too drastically contrasted, and have in some respects so much in common as to give the plot welcome subtleties. The women compel our homage—first Myrrha, the favourite concubine, who helps to a sense of actuality the Sardanapalus whom she loves in spite of herself.

> King, I am your subject!
> Master I am your slave! Man, I have loved you!—
> Loved you I know not by what fatal weakness,
> Although a Greek and born a foe to monarchs—
> A slave, and hating fetters—an Ionian
> And, therefore, when I love a stranger, more
> Degraded by that passion than by chains!
> Yet f have loved you. If that love were strong
> Enough to overcome all former nature,
> Shall it not claim the privelege to save you?
> (I. ii.)

Equally we can share the sentiments of the queen, whom Sardanapalus himself is forced to address as 'my gentle, wrong'd Zarina' (IV. i.). She wins not only our sympathy, but our admiration.

Nor is the increasing speed of the drama much held up by distractingly long passages of soliloquy or speech-making, though these might be reduced, they aid the action of the play, even the account Sardanapalus gives of his dream-meeting with 'those once bloody mortals, and now bloodier idols', his ancestors, Nimrod and Semiramis (IV. i.); or the

lyrical outburst of the Hymn to the Sun, proffered by Beleses, for both are in place as reinforcing the motives of the characters. The duologues, again, though too long, are not merely philosophic arguments are concerned with action, as, for instance, that between Salamenes and Sardanapalus, where the former says:

> Think'st thou there is no tyranny but that
> Of blood and chains? The despotism of vice—
> The weakness and the wickedness of luxury—
> The negligence—the apathy—the evils
> Of sensual sloth—produce ten thousand tyrants,
> Whose delegated cruelty surpasses
> The worst acts of one energetic master
> However harsh and hard in his own bearing.
> (I. ii.)

All this has a direct relevance to what is happening. The emotional structure of the play, the changes in speed, the variations in tension and expectation are admirably managed. As Dr. Samuel Chew points out in his excellent book, *Dramas of Lord Byron,* there is a rise in the hero's fortunes, a definite climax, a fall; the appetencies aroused are satisfied. Of its kind, though this may not be of the highest, it is first-rate.

This was the intense period of Byron's play-writing activities, the composition of the rest being crammed into about six months furious production. ([3]) Seeing what high poetical power went into the 'mysteries', *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth,* it is not surprising that the, 'human' plays should fall below the previous ones in quality of thought and of workmanship.

With *The Two Foscari* we are back in Venetian history, and to obsessed characters—three of them in this play; and as Byron presents the younger Foscari he is too extreme to win our belief in his existence. There is a life only in his despair; torture is nothing to him so long as he can suffer it in Venice, and he is full of such phrases as: 'Better/Be ashes here than aught that lives elsewhere', or:

> I ask no more than a Venetian grave,
> A dungeon, what they will, so it be here.
> (I. i.)

Hardly more believable is his father, the Doge, who, because he has vowed to do all that the ruling 'Ten' tell him to do, watches his son being 'put to the question': even the fiendishly revengeful hatred of Loredano, as detailed, strains

our credulity. Historical? Maybe; we can read it in plain form in Rogers's *Italy*. But this does not affect an audience.

The real objection to this play is that it does not build up a satisfactory structure of the emotions. It is all one emotion of painful stress and distress, the unrelieved tension allowing hardly an instant's grace. The one moment, possibly, is when the already racked Jacopo Foscari indulges in a panegyric on his young days in Venice. Yet that passage has its own interest, for here, Byron was trying to make us realise why Jacopo felt so extravagantly about Venice, compressing into a very short space what the critics of his day complained could have been convincingly led up to but for adherence to the unities. He was struggling to do what Ibsen so triumphantly achieved—abolish the first two acts of five.

If, however, the pace is too uniform, if the scene is too wholly one, made up of torture and what we might call masochistic subjection, and at the end the rapidly successive deaths of both Foscari (history again sacrificed for the sake of the unities), this is not to say that there is not some good contrast of character, such as is supplied by the ineffectual but at least humane-feeling Barbarigo who tries to make the malevolent Loredano have at least a grain of compassion: and there is Marina, the wife of Jacopo, the typical Byronic heroine, who puts up a splendid fight trying to imbue the Doge and his son with some spirit and some sense, and who, in the one really dramatic prison-scene of the play (III. i.) spiritedly stands up to Loredano. Nor is the play lacking in fine passages, and we hear echoes of plays past and to come. When the Doge speaks of

> . . . the original ordinance, that man
> Must sweat for his poor pittance
> Aloof, save fear of famine!
>
> (II. i.)

he is forestalling Cain ; and when he goes on:

> All is low
> And false, and hollow—clay from first to last,
> The prince's urn no less than the potter's vessel,

and that 'nothing rests upon our will', we remember similar thoughts as uttered by Manfred and the Doge Faliero.

Of *Werner* I have neither space nor inclination to say much. It is sheer melodrama, adapted from a tale which

had made a deep impression on Byron when he read it as a boy of fourteen([4]), and had even then tried to dramatise. The play has certain of Byron's characteristic marks; the chief persons are, if not obsessed by an idea, at least under the sway of a passion which drives out all other thoughts. And, as usual, his main female character, Josephine, is all tender solicitude and common sense. But here alone, and this is a comment on his theory, Byron sins against the sacred unities, the last act being a year later than the previous ones, and set in a different place; here alone some of Byron's characters have a certain quality of humour. But the dramas seem comparatively cheap, with its somewhat tangled story, its secret passage, and its surprise when the young hero of the play, so open and daring, turns out to be the murderer when all the clues we have been given point to another as the culprit. It is mere stage trickery. That this should have been Byron's only popular success might have brought a sardonic smile to his lips. 'Just the sort of thing Drury lane *would* like!'.

Werner, however, shares with Byron's other dramas a freedom from the pseudo-Elizabethan stage diction which clogged the plays of the other poets of the time, most of whom,—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, Shelley—with a notable lack of success attempted the drama, the only one approaching him in workable stage speech being Landor. Byron irritated the academic critics of his day by his free treatment of blank verse, complaining that he ended his lines too often with inexpressive words, such as 'of', 'to', 'and', 'but', 'from', and that his sole idea of blank verse was to cut up prose into sausage-lengths of ten syllables. But Byron was quite right. His verse is admirable stage speech. Dramatic blank verse is, after all, only a form which the actor can speak out effectively to a large audience, given his limited amount of breath. Byron's verse, as I hope my quotations have shown, is eminently sayable. And in 'breaking down (his) poetry as nearly as he could to common language' (he said that after *Manfred* was done) he was going back to Ben Jonson—as he did for the unities—for 'language such as men doe use'. On the whole he succeeded. As Sir Egerton Brydges wrote:

> Lord Byron's style ... did not attempt (as is the common practice) to make poetry by the metaphorical and the figurative; it followed his thoughts, and was a part of them;

and Professor Wilson Knight judges his verse as having a beautiful Augustan clarity.

He was by no means consistent—luckily, we might say. In *The Two Foscari,* for example, Barbarigo can say to Loredano:

> Follow *thee*! I have follow'd long
> Thy path of desolation, as the wave
> Sweeps after that before it. . . . (I. i.)

and so on for another five lines. But *un*luckily he is given to a conventional inversion of the negative, after the manner of 'wilt thou accept not', but without Shelley's metrical justification. In *Sardanapalus* there are such things as 'urge me not' (I. ii.) and 'Tempt me not' (II. i.), where 'do not urge me', or 'do not tempt me' would do better; In *Cain* we have 'Did *I* bid her pluck them not?' It becomes a little theatrical.

More disturbing are his lapses, which might charitably be excused as going too far in the direction of colloquialism were there not another explanation. Writing to Murray when Jeffrey complained about the arguments in *Cain* being too elaborate, he riposted:

> What does Jeffrey mean by *elaborate?* Why! they were written as fast as I could put pen to paper, in the midst of revolutions and persecutions and proscriptions of all who interested me in Italy. They said the same of 'Lara', which I wrote while undressing, after coming home from balls and masquerades. Of all I have ever written, they are perhaps the most carelessly composed; and their faults, whatever they may be are those of negligence, and not of labour. I do not think this a merit, but it is a fact.
>
> (Moore's ed: XIV. 49n)

So with some of his turns of speech. It *was* negligence, and it was *not* a merit. His abominable carelessness (one is forced to this way of putting it), his refusal to discipline himself to the form—and how could he have had the time for this?—led him into unhappy phrasing. Sometimes the old gum clings to him, as when, in *The Two Foscari* Memmo says to Marina:

> High-born dame! bethink thee
> Where thou now art. (I. i.)

a hideously stilted phrase if ever there was one—and that in the first scene, which inevitably affects the whole.

That is the worst late eighteenth-century pseudo-poeticising, and of this Byron is more often guilty than we would wish. Sometimes he goes too far in the other direction, that of slack everyday speech. For example, in *Marino*

Faliero, just after the Doge hears the shattering news that the youth who has insulted him, and the Ducal crown, and his wife, has received a trivial sentence, and he is so faint that he has to clutch at his nephew for support, the latter says, 'Nay Cheer up, be calm,' (I. ii.); we are no longer in the Doge's palace but in the pub next door. and in *Werner,* in the admirably dramatic scene (V. i.) where Siegendorf, once Werner, is talking to Gabor, the supposed murderer of Strahlenheim, we get:

Gabor: *Allow* me to enquire who profited
By Strahlenheim's death? Was't I—as poor as ever;
And poorer by suspicion on my name!
The baron lost in that last outrage neither
Jewels nor gold; his life alone was sought,—
A life which stood between the claims of others
To honours and estates scarce less than princely.

Siegendorf: These hints, as vague as vain, attach no less
To me than to my son.

Gabor: *I* can't help that . . .
(V. i.)

The phrase comes too bluntly after the excellently running stage speech that Byron wrote on either side of it. The ethos of the scene is almost destroyed.

Yet, however much we may admit flaws in Byron's dramas, we are compelled to recognise them as products of a great spirit, undergoing, beneath the careless life that all could see, grievous distress, realising piercingly, as Maddalo did, that

Most wretched men
Are cradled into poetry by wrong,
They learn in suffering what they teach in song.
(Julian and Maddalo 11. 544-6.)

They are certainly among Byron's most deeply inspired creations. All of them, even those I have barely touched on, have tremendous passages, and it would seem monstrous that we should be debarred from seeing them in the theatre.

For though they were not meant for the stage, we can ask ourselves whether we would not experience in the theatre a greatly heightened sense of the actuality of what Byron was, not so much presenting, as asking us to read about. Unfortunately, contemptuous of the theatre, writing for the study, and thus not needing to bend himself to the

exigencies of the medium he despised, he allowed himself freedoms to which a reader *can* adjust himself, but which would be fatal on the stage.

Yet I feel strongly that, impertinent though it might be, Byron's dramas could be made viable as stage plays. Adaptation would certainly be required—Bertuccio Faliero ought to be allowed to tell the audience what was the crime that outraged the Doge—but the main task would be to cut, sometimes ruthlessly. The monologues could certainly be reduced, and the duologues imperatively must be, for drama seldom results when only two people are in action. There is not enough clash, and the best scenes in both *Marino Faliero* and *Sardanapalus* are those when several persons are in *action*. For, to repeat, drama *is* action, and not 'a kind of poem in dialogue'. Further when several persons have to be told separately of the hero's state of mind, the repetition, already a trifle tedious in the reading, would be irritating in the theatre. We read again and again how Marino Faliero defeated the Huns at Zara; again and again we learn that to be a Doge is nothing, that indeed

> There is no such thing—
> It is a word—nay, worse—a worthless by-word,
> The most despised, wrong'd, outraged, helpless wretch ...
> (I. ii)

For the reader this may possibly intensify the Doge's agony; but an audience is impatient at hearing the same thing over and over.

So the plays as they stand, with the possible exception of *Sardanapalus,* may well seem intractable to the manager of a theatre. Yet they are so deeply felt, so full of impassioned life, that it should be possible to make sure of tedium never overtaking an audience, and, without distortion, make superb stage productions of these dramas. It would take thought, and real sympathy with what Byron wished to convey, but the labour would be a thousand times worth while. If ever the dream of a national theatre is realised, the plays of Byron ought, surely, to form a not inglorious part of the extra-Shakespearean repertory.

REFERENCES

[1] *England and the English, 1883.*

[2] I do not wish to enter into biographical issues. The reader may be referred to Lord Lovelace's *Astarte (1905)* and much previous and subsequent controversy.

[3] *Marino Faliero,* begun 4 April 1820, finished 16 July. *Sardanapalus* took from 13 January, 1821 to 21 May ; *The Two Foscari,* 12 June to 9 July ; *Cain,* begun exactly a week later, was completed on 9 September. Then, in October, *Heaven and Earth;* in November (apparently), *The Deformed Transformed, Werner* being begun on 18 December, and finished 20 January, 1822.

[4] 'Kruitzner'. The German's Tale, by Harriet Lee, in *Lee's Canterbury Tales,* which she wrote with her sister Sophia. The Lees were enormously acclaimed in their day.

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