

Mirco Stober

“Says Shakespeare, who just now is much in fashion”

Shakespeare in the Theatre of Byron

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Recklinghausen im November 2023

Mirco Stober

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Abbreviations

- BHD* Lansdown, Richard. *Byron's Historical Dramas*. Oxford UP, 1992.
- BLJ* *Byron's Letters and Journals*. Edited by Leslie Marchand, Harvard UP, 1973-82. 12 vols.
- HVSV* *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*. Edited by Ernest J. Lovell Jr., Macmillan, 1954.
- CPW** *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. Edited by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols., Clarendon Press, 1980-93.
- LL* Franklin, Caroline. *Byron: A Literary Life*. Macmillan, 2000. Lit. Lives.
- SERI* Bate, Jonathan. *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. Clarendon P, 1989.

For the individual works by Byron taken from McGann's edition:

- CHP* *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
- DJ* *Don Juan*
- Man.* *Manfred*
- MF* *Marino Faliero*
- Sar.* *Sardanapalus*
- Wer.* *Werner*
- 2F* *The Two Foscari*

* There are many different editions of Byron's poems and plays and "[e]very reader has to be, in the final upshot, his or her own editor" (Cochran, *Byron's Romantic Politics* 146) as all of the editions have their flaws. The edition used in this thesis is the one by Jerome J. McGann, *The Complete Poetical Works*, 7 vols, 1980-93, so expensive that it is "affordable only to dedicated specialists and to well-off libraries", as well as "hard to obtain" (Cochran, *Byron's Romantic Politics* 138), and Peter Cochran lists several shortcomings of McGann's edition (see *Byron's Romantic Politics* 138-46). McGann's edition, however, is still considered to be the standard edition (see Lansdown, *Introduction* 169), offers extensive notes as well as detailed information on each of Byron's major works, which is why it is used in this study. References to the editor take the form of *CPW*, references to the prefaces to Byron's plays are cited, for example, as "Preface to *Sardanapalus*" followed by the page number in *CPW*.

1 Introduction

Usually “[w]e do not normally think of the Romantic era as a time of great drama” (Moore and Strachan 169) but as “undramatic and antitheatrical” (Carlson, “Theatre” 491) and as “a low point in the history of British drama” (Ferber 191). This is mostly an “uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representation” (McGann, *Romantic Ideology* 1)¹. As a result of this absorption Romantic² theatre has long been disregarded in scholarship and it is “only contemporary recently, as a result of realignments in the disciplines of literary studies and history, that the centrality of the theatre in Georgian culture and society has been properly recognized” (Russell, “Theatrical Culture” 100)³. The relative neglect of Romantic drama in literary criticism is also reflected in the study of Byron’s work. Byron, “the most famous (and infamous) writer of the day” (Stabler, “Exile” 31), had a lifelong interest in theatre and between 1817 and 1824 “wrote eight dramatic works, more than any major poet since Dryden” (Richardson, *Mental Theatre* 43), which makes him “the most important British dramatist of the Romantic period”

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- 1 Actually “Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats all wrote at least one tragedy for the stage” (Barton, “Light” 140) because the “heightened level of risk associated with a theatrical performance, along with the financial rewards, and the accompanying celebrity, appealed to nearly all of the now famous poets of the period” (Gardner, “Case” 481).
 - 2 Referring to the American scholar A.O. Lovejoy, Cuddon remarks that “the word ‘romantic’ has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing at all” (620). Hence the Romantic period is equally hard to define. If loosely applied the Romantic period refers to a “literary movement in European literature (and other arts) during the last quarter of the 18th c. and the first twenty or thirty years of the 19th c.” (Cuddon 623). If narrowly defined the “Romantic period in Britain is usually taken to run between 1798, the year in which Coleridge and Wordsworth published the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and 1832, when Sir Walter Scott and Goethe died and the Reform Bill was passed” (Cuddon 623). This thesis extends Cuddon’s definition of the Romantic period to reflect the impact of the French Revolution, that is it lasts from 1789 to 1832, because that is the definition that “has often been cited in readers, anthologies, and course packs, although those dates (like all others) are arbitrary, and alternatives abound” (Roe 6). In this thesis the terms Romantic, Romantic period, Romantic era, and Romantic age (the last three are used interchangeably) refer merely to the time period, while terms such as Romanticism and Romanticist refer to a literary movement (see Cuddon 621-22).
 - 3 On the one hand, theatre was the “pre-eminent forum of entertainment, art and instruction” (Russell, “Theatrical Culture” 100) and, as “romantic drama engage[s] actively with the historical and social milieu which engendered it”, the “theatre world of the English Romantic period gives us phenomenal access to the fantasies and daily realities of a people living through one of the Western world’s most revolutionary periods” (Carlson, “Theatre” 490; see Purinton 17). On the other hand, “the importance of theatricality to Georgian society” (Russell, *Theatres* 17) means that the “discourse, practise, and images of the theatre” were not confined to the theatre but “pervaded all aspects of culture” (Russell, “Theatre” 223), contemporary politics and the law (see Russell, “Theatre” 223).

(LL 61). Yet, his plays, unlike his poems, have been largely disregarded in scholarship⁴ although “Byron himself thought very highly of his dramas, put much thought and labor into their conception and execution, and predicted that they would one day be regarded among the most important things he had written” (McGann, *Fiery Dust* 229). The disregard in scholarship can be dated back, for example in the case of *Werner*, to negative reviews by “contemporary reviewers in organs such as *The Examiner*, *Monthly Magazine*, *Monthly Review*, and *New Edinburgh Review*” (Yu 120) or attributed to scathing analyses by early literary critics such as Chew who, in 1915, “dismisses *Werner* in three pages” (Cochran, “Harriet Lee’s *The German’s Tale*” 178), which has influenced successive critics like Barton who calls *Werner* “Byron’s one genuinely bad and derivative play” (“Light” 139) or Marchand who states that “[l]ittle need be said about *Werner* as a dramatic production or as poetry” (*Byron’s Poetry* 105). Moreover, the lack of criticism in the case of *Werner* seems to be self-perpetuating in that “nobody looks at it, because [...] well, nobody looks at it, do they?” (Cochran, “Harriet Lee’s *The German’s Tale*” 179).

Byron’s plays constitute a diverse corpus, ranging from the dramatic poem *Manfred* (1817) to the tragedies *Marino Faliero* (1821), *Sardanapalus* (1821), *The Two Foscari* (1821), and *Werner* (1822), the mysteries *Cain* (1821) and *Heaven and Earth* (1822), to the unfinished drama *The Deformed Transformed* (1824)⁵. The plays are rarely discussed together, with Corbett’s *Byron and Tragedy* being an important exception. Instead, the corpus is frequently subdivided, for example into “speculative dramas” – *Manfred*, *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth*, and *The Deformed Transformed* – and “historical dramas” (Marchand, *Byron’s Poetry* 75) – *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*. The historical, or, to use Spence’s term, regular dramas, “have not received much critical attention” (Spence, “Moral Ambiguity” 6), with Lansdown (*Byron’s Historical Dramas*) being a notable exception. When it comes to individual plays *Manfred* has received much critical attention, primarily because it is seen as part of Byron’s poems and not as a drama⁶, which might also account for the critical attention given to *Cain* or

4 McGann observes that “criticism of Byron’s plays is usually most disappointing, mainly because readers do not treat them as plays but as documents in which one can rummage about for Byronic ideas and themes” (*Fiery Dust* 228). According to Franklin, Byron’s plays are even “considered failures as plays by some theatre historians” because “they do not contribute to the progress towards dramatic realism of the nineteenth century” and instead “focus on introspection at the expense of plot development” (LL 62).

5 The labels “dramatic poem”, “tragedy”, and “mystery” refer to the subtitles on the title page of the first edition of each work.

6 Melchiori, for example, argues that “*Manfred* is generally seen as the conclusion of a poetic phase, while *Marino Faliero* marks the real beginning of Byron as a dramatist” (50; see Marchand, *Byron’s Poetry* 97). Consequently, Melchiori suggests that “*Manfred* and *Beppo* belong together” (55). In his *Cambridge Introduction to Byron* Lansdown discusses *Manfred* separately from the other seven plays. Gleckner’s and Beatty’s collection *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays* also excludes *Manfred*. In *Byron*, Drummond Bone discusses *Manfred* in depth and isolated from the other seven plays to which he

Heaven and Earth, the latter of which “is deliberately lyrical in mood” (Melchiori 52). *Werner* and *The Deformed Transformed* have hardly received critical attention at all⁷.

Although to a far lesser extent compared to Byron’s poetry, critics have so far shed light on different aspects of Byron’s plays. This includes, for example, their politics, particularly of *Marino Faliero* (see Ashton, “*Marino Faliero*”; Earle; Gonsalves; Hume Johnson; Rawes; White), the neoclassicism of *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari* (see Cooke; Beatty; Arthur D. Kahn), the Gothic nature of *Manfred*, *Marino Faliero*, and *Werner* (see Coghen, “Gothic in Byron’s Dramas”; Spence, “Supernatural”; Twitchell; Martin), the plays’ relation to the stage (see Purinton; Richardson, *Mental Theatre*), and finally individual topical concerns like love, death, freedom, and ambivalence in *Sardanapalus* (see Clancy; Shears; Spence, “Moral and Sexual Ambivalence”), remorse in *Manfred* (see Evans), ambiguity in *Marino Faliero* (see Spence, “Moral Ambiguity”), or the dichotomy between determination and free choice in *Werner* (see Yu). Critics have also discussed female characters in the plays (see Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines*), as particularly *Sardanapalus* has generated feminist interest (see Kelsall, “Slave-Woman”; Wolfson).

An aspect that has received surprisingly little attention is the influence of Shakespeare on Byron’s dramas, although Shakespeare has been called “the lion in the path” (Trelawny 75) of Romantic drama (see O’Neill 288) and although “Byron’s plays construct an intricate dialogue with those of Shakespeare” (Taylor 131). The contributions in this area are mainly limited to Wilson Knight, Barton, Bate, and Lansdown⁸. In *Byron and Shakespeare*, published in 1966, Wilson Knight explores how “Byron lived Shakespeare” and argues that “Byron was Shakespearian drama incarnate”⁹ (*Byron* 4, 10), that is “in the course of his life the poet became the incarnation of various Shakespearean characters – Hamlet, Macbeth, Richard III, Falstaff, Timon, Prospero, and so on” (Barton, “Byron” 231; see *SERI* 229; Wilson Knight, *Byron* 18), but also discusses the influence of Shakespeare on Byron’s works. In a chapter of his 1989 book *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*, Bate discusses “Byron’s pose” (*SERI* 222) towards Shakespeare and examines evidence from his letters, his journals, as well as ex-

dedicates a single short chapter titled “The Late Dramas”. Stabler, *Burke* and Watkins are notable exceptions in that they discuss *Manfred* as a drama.

7 McGann, for instance, discusses neither *Werner*, nor *The Deformed Transformed* in *Fiery Dust* but all of the other six plays, as does Franklin in *Byron’s Heroines*. *The Deformed Transformed* is the only play mentioned but not discussed in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*. In Gleckner’s and Beatty’s collection *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays* there is only a single essay on *Werner* that is a reprint from Manning’s *Byron and his Fictions*. Marchand basically ignores *Werner* (see *Byron’s Poetry* 105). Hence, writing in 1988, Corbett argues that for *Werner* “a close synopsis of the action seems called for rather than the exegesis to which I have submitted the earlier texts” (192), which reflects the little critical attention given to the play.

8 Others, like Stabler (*Burke*), merely touch upon the subjects.

9 All quotations, unless indicated otherwise, are exact transcriptions from their source. This includes, for example, the use of italics.

amples from his poems and plays. In “Byron and Shakespeare” Barton, in 2004, further analyses Shakespeare’s influence on Byron but mainly focusses on episodes from Byron’s life and less on evidence from the actual work, although she discusses *Don Juan* briefly and mentions several other examples *en passant*¹⁰. The most substantial contribution to Shakespeare’s influence on Byron’s plays is Lansdown’s *Byron’s Historical Dramas*, published in 1992, which examines the “*realpolitik* of Byron’s relation to Shakespeare [...]—not in Byron’s letters or his critical prose (for all the importance of their contribution to this issue)—but in the creative heart of his drama” (*BHD* 118), that is in *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus*, and *The Two Foscari*, but, for example, not in *Manfred* or *Werner*. Of course, the issue of Shakespeare’s influence on a particular moment in a play has naturally surfaced in the critical debate surrounding that play, for example in Cochran’s or Corbett’s analysis of *Manfred* (see pp. 80 and 82). This study attempts to address both the relative lack of research as regards Byron’s plays in general and the influence of Shakespeare on his plays in particular.

The hypothesis of this study is that Byron’s plays are heavily influenced by Shakespeare and that this influence increases the theatricality of Byron’s plays which challenges the theory that these plays constitute ‘closet plays’ and instead supports the notion that these plays are not just products *of* but products *for* the early nineteenth-century stage. In line with this hypothesis this study first needs to prove that Shakespeare is a vital influence on Byron’s plays. This addresses a desideratum of research in that, with the exception of Lansdown in *Byron’s Historical Dramas*, who, however, focusses on only three tragedies, scholars have so far rested with identifying allusions to Shakespeare in Byron’s plays and “little critical attention has been paid to the important role of Shakespearean allusion in Byron’s intertextual game” (Montag 29). This study builds upon the work of these scholars, most notably Wilson Knight in *Byron and Shakespeare*, Jerome McGann in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, and also Peter Cochran, especially in *Manfred: An Edition of Byron’s Manuscripts and a Collection of Essays*, but goes beyond the state of research in that it focusses on “the important role of Shakespearean allusion in Byron’s intertextual game” (Montag 29) in his plays and thus shows that Shakespeare’s influence is vital and that he, for instance, provides Byron with answers to the key “problems of composition” (*BHD* 125) he faced when writing his plays.

In order to then argue that the influence of Shakespeare increases the theatricality of Byron’s plays, it is important to first define the concept of ‘theatricality’. The *OED* defines ‘theatricality’ as “[t]he quality or character of being theatrical” (“theatricality, n.”) with theatrical meaning “[p]ertaining to or connected with the theatre or ‘stage’, or with scenic representations” (“theatrical, adj. and n.”). In the context of this study it is important to distinguish between the two meanings inherent in this definition. Byron’s plays are, arguably, always “connected with the theatre or ‘stage’” (“theatrical, adj. and

10 The importance of the contributions by Bate and Barton is reflected by the fact that they are the only ones cited by Garrett in his brief summary of Shakespeare’s relationship to Byron (see 252-54).