

ABSTRACT

History is a major point of inquiry and exploration in all Byron's major, and many of his minor, works. Byron understands and conceptualizes history and its tight and troubled relationship with literature, drawing attention to the literariness of history and the historicity of literature in his wake. The aspiration to the 'truth' of history is, for Byron, a highly creative process, highlighting the cross-pollination of fact and fiction, and also exploring history's inherent theatricality. Historical writing shapes but, crucially, also distorts our understanding of history.

The dramatic works of Lord Byron are, on the whole, traditionally the least critically explored territory of his oeuvre. Byron's singular understanding and conceptualization of history in his dramas is the focus of this study, comprising the seven dramatic works he wrote between 1820 and 1822. As this thesis shows, these dramas make up a dynamic dramatic project, creating a space of formal, discursive and thematic experimentation, which reveals not only Byron's intense involvement in matters of drama but also, in a wider perspective, his understanding and treatment of history.

This study takes up Byron's treatment of history in his dramas and analyses it through the methodology of play laid out and adapted for use in literary studies by Wolfgang Iser. Iser adapted his conception of play from the founding anthropologically centered treatise on play by Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (1961), which he presented in his works *Prospecting* (1989) and *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (1993). Iser's methodology of play features Caillois's four strategies of play – *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* – and recasts them slightly in order to render them useful for analyses and exegeses of literary texts. This methodological framework, as this thesis argues, is especially useful for the discussion of Byron, whose essentially ludic style and thinking has often been misinterpreted as lack of intellectual rigour or authorial negligence. As this study shows, Iser's theory of play helps to rectify this misinterpretation and produce in its stead an exploration of the fine intricacies of Byron's dramatic works, placing them alongside the established masterpieces of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*.