

## **Miroslava Horová: History and Play in Lord Byron's Dramas (2014)**

**This is an interesting thesis that asks some probing questions about Byron's plays. It takes as its starting point the fact that Byron's dramas have, until very recently, been undervalued; and it seeks, through the application of play theory that goes back to Roger Caillois' *Les jeux et les hommes*, to find alternative ways of reading the plays that will allow them to emerge as creatively engaged with ideas of history and moral thought. The thesis proceeds chronologically, with an investigation of *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari*, *Sardanapalus*, *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth*, *Werner*, and *The Deformed Transformed*.**

I would be interested, in the first instance, to ask questions about the general recuperation of Byron that has been proceeding over the past two decades or so, and about the ways in which the candidate would situate her own contribution within this area. Since the late twentieth century, we have had substantial revaluations of Byron as thinker, as political animal, and as an exponent of 'mental theatre'. What are the factors that have driven these revaluations? And, specifically, how does the revaluation of Byron's dramas relate to the deepening interest in Romantic drama in general?

What might we learn from where we think we are now? If, for Byron, history matters 'now—for, but also in, the present', how might we read ourselves reading Byron, in the way the candidate proposes? If the history of the critical appraisal of Byron's dramas up to the end of the 1980s is 'perplexing', what factors contributed to that perplexity; and why do we now feel confident about our ability to see things more clearly, more exactly in accordance with the Byronic intention in writing the dramas?

Are there any ways in which the methodology of the thesis, and its conclusions, would enable us to feel differently about the dramas in performance, as opposed to our sense of the dramas on the page? If *play* is a crucial element in the working out of the dramatic tension, that might, in principle, be translatable into performance, in spite of Byron's clearly expressed view that he cannot 'conceive any man of irritable feeling putting himself at the mercies of an audience'. The candidate speaks of the elucidation

of the hitherto 'undiscovered dynamics of Byron's dramas', as a means of reclaiming the works from a largely unfavourable reputation. To what extent might the dramas be translatable into *some* form of performance? Or are the dramas still best conceived as remaining an activity that belongs to a predominantly mental theatre?

Others will, I know, explore the theoretical approaches of the thesis, so I will confine myself to a brief question: while it is clear that there is much to be gained from the application of ludic theory to the Byronic dramas, are there any limitations in so doing? If Byron's dramas have been read as 'rather serious' and 'stern', is that entirely to their disadvantage? Are there any problems in viewing the evolution of the dramas as an inevitable stage in the progress towards *Don Juan* (p. 192)? Life perpetually conceived as game might be only one side of the Byronic view of history, one that we currently value—but might it be overvalued? At least, there is the example of Byron's political commitment, which suggests that there might be exits from an entirely ludic view of the world and of history. Or perhaps not.

A final question on the unities and Byron's concern to preserve what might seem to be mere artifice, not least within an English tradition. In the Preface to *Sardanapalus*, Byron suggests that, 'with any very distant departure from them [the unities], there may be poetry, but can be no drama'. What might be the connections between this 'rule-based' idea of form and the ludic qualities with which the thesis is engaged? Why does Byron prefer 'the more regular formation of a structure, however feeble'? Why do the rules matter?

I should say that I found the thesis extremely interesting to read; that it trod the delicate line between theory and close reading very successfully, and that I have no hesitation in recommending the thesis for the defence.

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