Reforming Dramas: A Study of Byron's Historical Dramas

Nijibayasi, Kei
Japan Society for the Promotion of Science: Research Fellow

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Reforming Dramas : A Study of Byron's Historical Dramas

Kei Nijibayashi

Byron composed three historical dramas between 1820 and 1821 : *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari*. They have not been held in high critical regard ; in fact, both his contemporary and present-day critics view them as failures. But it is still worth examining the dramas to understand Byron's literary perspective in his later years. He needed to propose a new dramatic style to the English public, one which incorporated his literary ambition and political message.

i. Against the Contemporary Taste

In the early nineteenth century, the English stage was dominated by Shakespearean melodramas and Gothic dramas of "sensibility." Both were intended to give sensation and deployed exciting plots in order to gain audience's attention and contentment. Having left England in 1816, Byron began to notice "the bad taste of the times" (*BLJ* 6 : 237) of public in literature. He started reforming poetry with *Beppo* in 1818, which was followed by *Don Juan*. In drama too, he launched a new style with the historical dramas ; as Anne Barton says, "he was more acutely and intelligently aware than any of the other Romantics of exactly what was wrong with the contemporary London stage, of the extent to which it had deadened and degraded itself and could only be rescued now by the most radical reforms."[1]

Byron valued drama so much that he became a member of the Sub-

Committee of the Management of Drury Lane Theatre in 1815. His first drama was *Manfred* in 1817. It focuses on the demonic hero who despairingly denies anything except his now dead beloved. As Byron himself admitted, the play reflects to great degree his own psychological condition in exile in 1816 ; he felt "the recollections of bitterness -- & more especially of recent & more home desolation," and could not forget his "own wretched identity in the majesty & the power and the Glory" (*BLJ* 5 : 104-5) of the Alps. So he half-jokingly calls the drama "a Bedlam tragedy" (*BLJ* 5 : 188). He did not regard it as a play but as a poem. He knew that this kind of drama would not contribute to reforming the English stage. It must be something different not only from the contemporary dramas but also from *Manfred*.

Other contemporary poets tried to write Shakespearean dramas, but, as Richard Lansdown has stated, "The further the Romantic poets went in their pursuit of Shakespearian omniscience, the further they went from both the English dramatic tradition and from dramatic writing itself."[2] Byron comments : "I look upon him [Shakespeare] to be the *worst* of models -- though the most extraordinary of writers" (*BLJ* 8 : 152). He also saw danger in public zeal for sentimental and exciting plots, and "he wanted his audience to think, not to be transported out of itself into a world of day-dreams and somnambulist repose."[3] He thought that a drama must be assessed not only by its plots but also by its language and cathartic effects. Byron wanted to establish a new drama which leads us to imagine through the language used by protagonists. Being a classicist and an admirer of Pope, Byron found the idea of combining self-conscious poetry with classical dramatic form for balanced representation. This was one way to resolve his problems with his earlier autobiographical play and the contemporary vogue in drama. He wrote in a letter to John Murray on 23 August 1821.

> Your friend -- like the public is not aware that my dramatic Simplicity is *studiously* Greek -- & must continue so -- *no* reform ever succeeded at first. -- I admire the old English dramatists -- but this [*The Two Foscari*] is quite another field -- & has nothing to do with theirs. -- I want to make a *regular* English drama -- no matter whether for the Stage or not -- which is not my object -- but a *mental theatre*. . . . (*BLJ* 8 : 186-7)

Byron defines his new dramatic style as "simple" and "Greek." His use of latter term is ambiguous here, but it would seem to indicate that he "has in one instance attempted to preserve, and in the other to approach, the 'unities'" (*BPW* 453). He believes in the rules, "conceiving that with any very distant departure from them, there may be poetry, but can be no drama" (*BPW* 453). The "unities" are rules for writing dramas suggested by *Poetics* of Aristotle. In seventeenth century France, the rules were interpreted as sacred and strict for playwrights : in a drama, one coherent action must be completed within a single day at the same place. Byron borrowed this authoritative literary device from the French neo-classicists "to make a regular English drama." So his style may well be "very *un*like Shakespeare" (*BLJ* 8 : 152). The most curious thing in this passage is that he associates the "regular form" with "a mental theatre." He explicitly comments on this dramatic enterprise elsewhere that "it is an experiment whether the English *Closet* -- or *mental* theatre will or will not bear a *regular* drama instead of the melo-drama" (*BLJ* 8 : 185). "A mental theatre" may mean a closet drama, but we cannot immediately conclude that this is the case, particularly when we consider his ambiguous attitude to the stage. Though he denies the stage as "object," he sees his dramas as performable. But it is again certain that "a mental theatre" aims to make audience use their imagination : either they are reading or watching. Regular form restricts actions and emphasizes the language,

and this enables Byron to express the minute ups and downs of protagonists' mental movements as dramatic. Imagination is the key to make work the interesting combination of "a mental theatre" and the "regular form."

Now "simplicity," which is attained by the regular form, must be scrutinized in detail. In explaining about *The Two Foscari*, Byron wrote to John Murray on 20 September 1821.

> The Simplicity of plot is intentional -- and the avoidance of *rant* also -- as also the compression of the Speeches in the more severe situations. -- What I seek to show in "the Foscari's" is the *suppressed* passions -- rather than the rant of the present day. (*BLJ* 8 : 218)

There are two dramatic techniques mentioned : "simple plot" and "compressed speech," which naturally negates "rant." Through these, he aimed at unique expression of human feelings : "the *suppressed* passions." Byron's simple plot is understood by the word "Greek." In Greek tragedies, most of the action is not performed on stage but is suggested by cries or reports, or told by chorus. Naturally, we concentrate on the protagonists' speeches to understand the plot and enjoy the play. Audiences participate in the play imaginatively as they visualize for themselves the vivid scenery or feel their way into a scene. By the use of a flat plot, Byron tried to revive poetry in his dramas. We can see an instance of this effect in *Marino Faliero*. Lioni speaks to himself ;

> The many-twinkling feet so small and sylph-like,
> Suggesting the more secret symmetry
> Of the fair forms which terminate so well --
> All the delusion of the dizzy scene,
> Its false and true enchantments -- art and nature,

Which swarm before my giddy eyes, that drank
The sight of beauty as the parched pilgrim's
On Arab sands the false mirage, which offers
A lucid lake to his eluded thirst,
Are gone. Around me are the starts and waters --
Worlds mirror'd in the ocean, goodlier sight
Than torches glared back by a gaudy glass ;
And the great element, which is to space
What ocean is to earth, spreads its blue depths,
Soften'd with the first breathings of the spring. . . . (*BPW* 434-5)

The corrupted beauty of Venetian society and the superior beauty of orderly nature are contrasted and this contrast reflects the drama's political theme of revolution and freedom ; freedom is always associated with a nature opposing to the restrictive society of tyranny. This speech seems to succeed in creating a new poetic beauty in its dramatic content. It not only represents the essence of the drama but also highlights its plot from a different point of view. The flat plot can enhance the poetic quality of speeches.

Next we should consider "the compression of the Speeches in the more severe situations." In dramas with little action, we pay attention to the speeches and we expect that they express much emotion, which may be violent and self-revealing. But Byron denies "rant" in his speeches. We can see what he does in restricting not only the dramatic form but also speeches in this example. Francis Foscari's words against the council of "Ten" certainly realize "the compressed speech" ;

Signors, you may depart : what would you more?
We are going : do you fear that we shall bear
The palace with us? Its *old* walls, ten times

As *old* as I am, and I'm very old,
Have served you, so have I, and I and they
Could tell a tale ; but I invoke them not
To fall upon you! else they would, as erst
The pillars of stone Dagon's temple on
The Israelite and his Philistine foes.
Such power I do believe there might exist
In such a curse as mine, provoked by such
As you ; but I curse not. Adieu, good signors! (*BPW* 518)

Foscari's words do not attack the "Ten" directly. Instead, he uses the subjunctive mode and negation, referring the matter to a biblical anecdote. He suppresses his feeling by the word "would" and this paradoxically emphasizes his rage. He compares his repressed intention to the walls ; they are ready to release their potential destructive power. Negation is more effective. He invokes the walls "not" and curses "not" the signors. Utterance indicates a certain emotion which is understandable and ready to be answered. But negation suggests the unuttered whole ; no one can clearly see the real feeling behind the negative. This powerful language seems to succeed in expressing the suppressed intense feelings ; it is the opposite of Manfred's "rant." It is proved that Byron's historical dramas achieve a new expression of humanity through interaction between allusive language in dramas and active imagining by audience.[4]

However, there are some faults with Byron's historical dramas. The plots are too simple ; they are too much depended on protagonists' meditation. For example, it is rather hard for us to sympathize with Marino Faliero's decision to take revenge because the reason is not shown in the plot. Without sympathy for the protagonists, we cannot fully comprehend their mental agony. Indeed, Byron emphasizes language to

the point that the timing between speeches and actions is sometimes awkward ; as a result, we have untimely anticlimaxes. Byron understood these faults ; this is why he excused his historical dramas as closet dramas and not for the stage. Now we should analyze the contents of the dramas, another reason for his enthusiasm in reforming drama.

ii. Historicized Political Messages

Marino Faliero and *The Two Foscari* are dramas based on the facts of Venetian history. *Sardanapalus* has its source, according to Byron, in Mitford's *History of Greece*, which he read when he was a boy ; the book follows the historical events of the Assyrian dynasties. Marino Faliero and Francis Foscari are doges : Sardanapalus a king. Marino Faliero is a patriotic rebel (even as a doge) who is betrayed and executed by the more powerful authority of the Council. As a doge, Francis Foscari is forced to judge his son as criminal and to be treacherously dethroned by the "Ten" at Loredano's manoeuvre. Sardanapalus is a benign and unbloody king who forgives even traitors and tries to win his country over to peace by love and friendship. In the end, the chaotic situation of revolt compels him to change himself into a fierce warrior and he commits suicide betrayed and surrounded by the traitors. We can find a common type among the three characters : they are in the highest class of society, are politically neutral or liberal and opposite to the authority, are betrayed or wronged by circumstances. Byron calls the destiny of the characters a "tragedy."

We can compare these heroes to Prometheus. They are unselfish devotees for people and nation : their motivation for revolution or reformation comes from their individual liberalism. Here we can clearly see the development in Byron's dramatic characters. Manfred is a Promethean figure, but his egoism and self-destructive theory render him

a desperate and demonic misanthropist. He defies and denies himself as irrecoverably destined to a tragedy : "There is a power upon me which withholds, / And makes it my fatality to live" (*BPW* 393). In contrast, the heroic figures in the historical dramas are described as altruistic ; they give public welfare a preference to personal matters. With strong wills, they never defy their own fates in their fight against the inhuman power of authorities. Unlike the frustrated Manfred, they could release their own energy for this worthwhile purpose. This new heroism seems to make his self-consciousness compatible with political context ; reality is required in historical writing and it restricts and prevents the poet's ego from overshadowing his dramas.

As already suggested, liberty is the goal of the political revolution or reformation in Byron's historical plays. Faliero attempts to overturn the Venetian government, Foscari insists on living out his days as a doge, and Sardanapalus hates conquests, each for the sake of either personal or public liberty. The protagonists try to realize a liberal and democratic society ; even in their failure they avow their spiritual independence from the system against which they stand. Their liberty is always associated with personal dignity and honour. In contrast, the political system or body is shown to ignore humanity for the sake of its own smooth functioning. For example, Francis Foscari meditates on the relationship between a man and an invisible force of "policy" :

> *Doge*. Perhaps so ;
> But yet subdued the world : in such a state
> An individual, be he richest of
> Such rank as is permitted, or the meanest,
> Without a name, is alike nothing, when
> The policy, irrevocably tending
> To one great end, must be maintain'd in vigour. (*BPW* 504)

Even Foscari, a doge, is "nothing" compared to "policy" : he expresses a sense of despair and nullity as an "individual." A political system excludes the individual ; like a monstrous machine, it exists for itself alone, dehumanizing people, turning them into cogs on the wheel. [5] For the protagonists, this is the reason of revolt, an action supposed to liberate and regain human dignity : one of the main themes of Romantic literature. Placing high value on the individual in politics, Byron disliked any kind of system ; he talked about politics in his journal on 16 January 1814 : "I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments . . . . The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery all over the earth, and one sort of establishment is no better, nor worse, for a *people* than another" (*BLJ* 3 : 242). We can observe Marino Faliero's agonized soul in his struggle against the repressive system. He says that in a community governed by a system, people "are nothing in the state, and in / The city worse than nothing -- mere machines" (*BPW* 413). Despising his own social position, he talks about himself ;

> *Doge*. You overrate my power, which is a pageant.
> This cap is not the monarch's crown ; these robes
> Might move compassion, like a beggar's rags ;
> Nay, more, a beggar's are his own, and these
> But lent to the poor puppet, who must play
> Its part with all its empire in this ermine. (*BPW* 414)

He denies his own personal authority and he admits that his power as a doge is borrowed from the political body, to which he is a slave, thus showing how miserable and comical he is. Faliero commits himself to Bertuccio's conspiracy because he has lost his own individual will in the system and he needs to regain it to live a humane life. He values personal

dignity and honour, and this does not harmonize with the Venetian law and system.

> My present power such as it is, not that
> Of Doge, but of a man who has been great
> Before he was degraded to a Doge,
> And still has individual means and mind ;
> I stake my fame (and I had fame) -- my breath --
> (The least of all, for its last hours are high)
> My heart, my hope, my soul, upon this cast!
> Such as I am, I offer me to you
> And to your chiefs ; accept me or reject me, --
> A Prince who fain would be a citizen
> Or nothing, and who has left his throne to be so. (*BPW* 430)

What Faliero relies on in his revolutionary plot are his fame, breath, heart, hope, soul and his body itself : that is, his individual self. This passage is perhaps the most forceful statement of Byron's ideal of political heroism in his historical dramas : revolution for humanity.[6] This is significant in the early nineteenth century England. For example, Luddism, for which Byron spoke at the House of Lords, most obviously symbolizes the struggle against the machine, which appeared to begin to exclude the human. Not only the terror in the wake of the French Revolution but also tyranny and oppression to democratic liberalism (like Peterloo Massacre in 1819) manifested tendencies to dehumanize people for sake of policy. In this context, Byron's heroism self-consciously argues that a powerful individual must be the leader of revolution as he himself helped Greece gain independence from Turkey.

Writing his historical dramas, Byron spontaneously associated them with revolutionary activities in Italy in his letters : "The tragedy

[*Marino Faliero*] is finished but when it will be copied is more than can be reckoned upon.-- We are here upon the eve of evolutions and revolutions" (*BLJ* 7 : 137). It is undeniable that his "mental theatre" uses history as a key to stimulating an audience to consider it as their own problem. In our imagination, the history recounted in a drama can overlap with the present situation. Byron says in the preface to *Marino Faliero* ;

> Whether I have succeeded or not in the tragedy, I have at least transferred into our language an [*sic*] historical fact worthy of commemoration. (*BPW* 408)

Byron emphasizes a "historical fact" as "worthy" : so his political experience in Italy. He wrote "historical" dramas because the reality of history would more effectively convince an audience of his political defence of freedom : there were heroes who fought for human dignity, and now we are in a similar situation waiting for new heroes.[7] Patterns in history were indispensable idea for Byron. He represents this sense of historical continuity in the heroes' speeches. They are motivated and justified to revolt by the past ; and they motivate and justify their later generation in future. The right to be an individual is advocated by past and proved by future in the dramas. Marino Faliero invokes dead sages, meditating on his own project.

> Spirits! smile down upon me ; for my cause
> Is yours, in all life now can be of yours, --
> Your fame, your name, all mingled up in mine,
> And in the future fortunes of our race!
> Let me but prosper, and I make this city
> Free and immortal, and our house's name

Worthier of what you were, now and hereafter. (*BPW* 426)

The sprits of the past give Faliero dignity and confidence and they must support him because "my cause is yours." History is a spiritual inheritance here : the same fight for freedom has been taken through ages unnoticed. Byron also turns his eyes to the effect of revolution in near future. He suggests that the last words of Mario Faliero and Sardanapalus's memorial fire by suicide are poetic messages of liberty that will finally bring about the defeat of the political system. Faliero's words, in fact, begin to move people's mind towards revolution. One of the crowd gathering around the court to see the Doge's execution reports that Faliero's voice "Swells up like mutter'd thunder" (*BPW* 452) and another replies to him.

Fifth Cit. Wisely they [the "Ten"] did to keep their portals barr'd.
Would we had known the work they were preparing
Ere we were summon'd here -- we would have brought
Weapons, and forced them! (*BPW* 452-3)

Even though this citizen uses subjunctive mode, a revolutionary feeling has been already planted in his mind. Faliero's end is disastrous, but his will has left a thought in people's mind. This will be inherited by later generation and will motivate them like Faliero's past spirits. As Barton suggests, Byron seems to have expected the same kind of response from audience against the English government : "Like Brecht, Byron aimed through his historical plays to change men's minds, to influence action. His Faliero, his Foscari, and his Sardanapalus are voices addressed to Greece under a tyranny, to the Italian patriots, to an England inching along towards the Reform Bill."[8] For Byron, poetry is not only personal but also eternal and universal : "What is poetry? -- The feeling of a

Former world and Future" (*BLJ* 8 : 37) "And feeling, in a poet, is the source / Of others' feeling. . ." (*BPW* 696). It is quite plausible that Byron cleverly ventriloquized many voices in the protagonists' speeches to attract audience's interest both in literature and politics and to promulgate his political message with the English public.

Conclusion

Byron started writing his historical dramas in opposition to Shakespearean and Gothic melodramas and in an effect to reform the English stage. His reformation is based on reviving the power of language in drama, which naturally emphasizes his political or poetic messages. He labelled his own dramas "mental theatre," which requests an audience's active participation in and through imagination. He devised a regular form faithful to "unities." He also limited "rant" or exaggerated speeches both to make audience concentrate on slight changes in speeches and to control self-conscious writing. By these means, he aimed at compressing speeches and suppressing the feelings expressed in them. To some extent, he was successful. The historical context is used for creating altruistic heroes and for representing the contemporary political situation. Especially, the heroes' goal to regain humanity ironically points up the repressiveness of the political system of England.

Byron's historical dramas were ambitious enterprises in the history of English drama. As performable dramas, they have not been highly valued. But we can read them as different from and critical of poetical works by other Romantic poets. Personal experience and thoughts are the core of Romantic poetry. But sometimes poetry goes too far into the individuality of the self for the audience to understand or even sympathize with the poet. Byron was aware of this problem and he deployed a classic form and suppressed expression to solve it. It was an original attempt to

establish an artistic standard, balancing classicism and Romanticism.

Abbreviations

BPW Frederick Page, ed. *Byron : Poetical Works*. OUP, 1970.

BLJ Leslie A. Marchand, ed. *Byron's Letters and Journals*. 12vols. London : John Murray, 1973-82.

All the quotations from the two books above are indicated in the paper by the abbreviations with volume and page number in brackets.

Notes

[1] Anne Barton, " 'A Light to Lesson Ages' : Byron's Political Plays, " *Byron : A Symposium,* ed. , John D. Jump (Macmillan : London, 1975) 140. Hereafter quoted as Barton.

[2] Richard Lansdown, *Byron's Historical Dramas* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1992) 233. Hereafter quoted as Lansdown.

[3] Barton 161.

[4] See Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust : Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1968) 227. McGann's observation helps us understand Byron's "mental theatre" : "The plays do not aim to arouse suspense about the outcome of a plot development, as melodrama so frequently does ; on the contrary, they are intended to make the audience thoughtful and self-conscious, to force an understanding of the nature and causes of the fatality which the plays dramatize. *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari* certainly have a parable-like quality to them, and it is not at all unlikely that Byron's term 'mental theatre' was meant to have a significance somewhat beyond its specialized meaning of simple 'closet drama' . "

[5] Lansdown points out, "The code of despairing stoicism the Foscari adhere to is inhumane enough, but it stands in relation to a state and a political culture that is inhumanity incarnate. " Lansdown 190.

[6] Woodring notes, "It is by personal quality that Faliero merits identification with

public dignity. In his fall he exploits men of weaker state, whose grievances against the patricians he nonetheless holds to be as just as his own." Carl Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1970) 183.

[7] Corbett observes : "Despite the narrow historical focus of *The Two Foscari*, the tragedy contemplates and must be read not only against the political oppressivenss of the Venetian Republic, recently dead, but also of Metternich-dominated Italy, still alive, of which Byron had had recent and painful experience." Martin Corbett, *Byron and Tragedy* (London : Macmillan, 1988) 122.

[8] Barton 160.