Doubtful law

Jane Stabler

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Abstract and Keywords

Chapter 6 develops the nexus of narrative, history, and the law by considering the Dedication to Don Juan as a document of satiric belonging and non-belonging; the dramatic dialogues of Landor (including his dramatic scenes on the Cenci) as a distinctive form of political transmission to the reader, and the framing books of The Ring and the Book as an exiled discussion of the relationship between history, poetry, and readerly affect. The chapter closes with a discussion of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning’s controversial evaluation of the printed word over music as the art form most able to penetrate and release the sealed world of another consciousness.

Keywords: History, law, Don Juan, satire, readership, Landor, Browning, Beethoven
Byron, Mary Shelley, and Percy Shelley hold out differing levels of hope about the progression and transmission of history, but they are united in a concern bordering on paranoia about the judgements of a distant readership. Their concerns about retributive justice were informed by direct experience of protracted legal wrangles throughout their years of exile. In Venice in 1818, when Byron and Shelley rode together on the Lido, they discussed the state of the English stage, the possibility of a play on the subject of Marino Faliero, and their mauling by the English public and the courts. Shelley recalls,

Our conversation consisted in histories of his wounded feelings, & questions as to my affairs, & great professions of friendship & regard for me. He said, that if he had been in England at the time of the Chancery affair, he would have moved Heaven & Earth to have prevented such a decision.¹

The ‘Chancery affair’ refers to the decision to deny Shelley custody of his children by Harriet—an order that for Shelley represented the ultimate violation of sacred ties by the state. In all his law suits, Byron failed to move heaven and earth on Shelley’s behalf or his own, and his growing sense of the hopeless odds stacked against them emerges in the dramas he wrote between 1820 and 1822 (including *Heaven and Earth*), with explorations of individual will pitted against relentless cosmic forces.

Besides the battle for custody of his children, several other legal cases preoccupied Shelley during his time in Italy: the trial of Richard Carlile in October 1819 for blasphemous libel; the Shelleys’ lawsuit against their ex-servant Paolo; the application to Chancery to prevent the piracy of *Queen Mab* in the spring of 1821; the legal process through church courts about the future of Emilia Viviani; the possibility of prosecuting the treacherous servant, Elise, before the Tuscan tribunals in the summer of 1821; Byron and Shelley’s putative intervention in the sentencing of the thief condemned to death for stealing from a church in December 1821; the ongoing problem of the attorney in Grays Inn, who was supposed (p. 195) to be handling Shelley’s financial position; and the convoluted legal proceedings in the Tuscan courts following the Pisan affray in March 1822.
Byron was the major aggrieved party in the Pisan affray, but his other legal problems included the long-running Rochdale question, a lawsuit lost in 1820 ‘after fifteen years litigation – & two favourable verdicts’, and Byron’s awkward involvement as the third party in the Guiccioli separation. His list of legal hate figures was probably topped by Sir Samuel Romilly, who counselled Lady Byron at the beginning of her separation proceedings, forgetful of the fact that he held a retainer for Byron. When Hanson visited Venice in November 1818 and delivered the news of Romilly’s suicide, Byron added a jeering comparison to Canto I:

Like the lamented late Sir Samuel Romilly,  
The Law’s expounder and the State’s corrector,  
Whose suicide was almost an anomaly –  
One sad example more, that ‘All is vanity.’ –  
(The Jury brought their verdict in ‘Insanity’). (I, 15)

Official language peppers Don Juan, and legal shuffling is satirized from the very beginning of the poem with references to the divorce courts, which are also waiting in the wings of the English Cantos. The show trial of Queen Caroline was a public farce that was absorbed into the ‘Letter to John Murray’ via the infamous ‘non mi ricordo’ of one of the prosecution witnesses. In the Preface to Don Juan Cantos VI, VII, and VIII, Byron ridicules the coroner’s verdict on Castlereagh’s suicide, which stood in stark contrast to the adjudication that any ‘poor radical devil’ would have received.

The metaphor of the trial appears in Lady Blessington’s memoirs of Byron to describe the rough justice inflicted upon him by the English public:

I have often thought of writing a book to be filled with all the charges brought against me in England (said Byron); it would make an interesting folio, with my notes, and might serve posterity as a proof of the charity, good-nature, and candour of Christian England in the nineteenth century. (p.196) Our laws are bound to think a man innocent until he is proved to be guilty; but our English society condemn him before trial, which is a summary proceeding that saves trouble.
The pre-emptive tribunal, however, does not apply to everybody, and Byron expresses his rage in *Don Juan* at the way ‘men let these scoundrel Sovereigns break law’ (XV, 92).

Given the list of legal grievances shared by Byron and Shelley, it is hardly surprising that ‘Law’ is one of Shelley’s chief embodiments of tyranny, although he was careful to distinguish between the principles of English justice (such as being tried by a jury of one’s peers), and the contemporary operation of the courts under a figure like Lord Eldon. ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ celebrates the ‘old laws of England—they/Whose reverend heads with age are grey,/Children of a wiser day’ (ll. 331–3). In his letter to the *Examiner* about the trial of Carlile, Shelley demonstrates respect for ‘this admirable form peculiar to English law’ and to ‘the antient and perpetual practice of the English courts of Justice’; he ironically salutes due process when he writes to Robert Southey to refute his accusations of guilt: ‘With what care do the most tyrannical Courts of Judicature weigh evidence, and surround the accused with protecting forms; with what reluctance do they pronounce their cruel and presumptuous decisions compared with you!’.\(^7\) Shelley’s correspondence shows the keen interest with which he reflects upon ‘the spirit of the law’ and his perception that this spirit in England had been perverted by ‘the superstitious fury of the ruling sect’.\(^8\)

Byron and Shelley made sporadic attempts to wrest their identities from the control of judges, reviewers, and newspaper editors: the *Liberal* project was one such attempt to sway public opinion through educated, middle-class journalism, while dramatic composition represented another way of winning over the broader social constituency of theatre-goers (Shelley being more convinced than Byron that plays should be performed on stage).\(^9\) Byron, Shelley, and Hunt pitted themselves against the organ of tyranny represented by government newspapers, which, in turn, were supported by the force of law, and could set the official record, however partial or biased.
Byron’s satiric writing draws attention to the inaccuracies enshrined in ancient chronicles, popular memory, and official reports (as in the (p.197) misspelling of the Grose/Grove Peninsula casualty in Don Juan VIII, 18), and his poems ruefully acknowledge their own haphazard chances of survival. Shelley, however, remained more optimistic about the possibilities for transmission of truth through the ages. As Kelvin Everest has demonstrated, Shelley’s work on Adonais was a concerted effort to lift Keats out of the mire of periodical reviews and into the realms of high culture, specifically to counter the smearing accounts of Keats’s life by agents in the Tory press.¹⁰ A year after the publication of Adonais, Byron found himself trying to clear Shelley’s name, and having to contend with the ‘most outrageous caricatures’ that had been spread by the English papers, dating from 1816.¹¹ The question of how to counter defamation brings with it the perennial problem of how to address an audience, and the relationship between poet and ex-public.

The anxiety about identity that Shelley and Byron shared in exile offers a new way of reading Byron’s Dedication to Don Juan, which was first published in Moore’s Life and Works in 1832–3, but which dates from July 1818, when Byron was settling into Venetian life and trying to forge a new direction for his work. Murray at this time was keen to cast him as an aristocratic raconteur. Rose’s Letters from the North of Italy (1819) provides an example of the sort of travellers’ tales that Murray knew the English public wanted to hear, although it is difficult to imagine Byron coming up with the following description of the Venetian lagoon:

Towards the sea, we find the complete character of our Sussex shores, except near the mouth of the channels where mud has been carried out and deposited. Thus the lagoon-side, and the interior of the Lido, presents the appearance of meadows bordering the Southampton River.¹²
In another John Murray publication, Henry Matthews tells readers that, ‘if ruins are sought out as mere objects to please the eye, I doubt that there be any thing in Italy that could be put in comparison with Tintern Abbey’.\(^{13}\) Such comparisons help to show us how markedly different Byron’s attitude to his new home was: there is no question of trying to make English readers feel at home, or culturally superior, in the Venetian setting of *Beppo* or the whole of *Don Juan*, although Byron still cares keenly about the direction of English poetry.

*(p. 198)* Donald Reiman argues that, in *The Prophecy of Dante*, ‘Byron claims for himself the role of artist as patriot and political activist, a tradition long sanctified in Italy, heralded in England by Shakespeare and Milton, and at this period being renewed in England under the aegis of Scott and Wordsworth’.\(^{14}\) We can see this process at work in the Dedication to *Don Juan*, although the dislodging of Wordsworth and the realignment with Milton are perhaps more complicated than first appears. While the role of the exiled patriot might be sanctified in the Italian tradition, it is still fretted with contradiction for English writers, and Byron’s Dedication produces a radical interrogation of what it is to write in English, but not to belong to England/Castlereagh land at this time.

‘What poets have been your sponsors?’, is the question Byron asks himself at the beginning of *Don Juan*. One answer is that Byron fits in with Scott, Rogers, Campbell, Moore, and Crabbe—all of whom form an agreeable gentleman’s club, rather than a ‘school’. But Byron also presents Milton and Horace as deliberately isolated alter egos, articulating unpopular views or ironic commentaries on a culture that placed high importance on the notion of *‘proprie’*—what is proper, in the sense of what is formally and culturally appropriate.\(^{15}\) When we read or listen to the Dedication, it sweeps us along—it sounds absolutely unassailable. But if we dwell on the interplay between individual allusions, we can detect tensions in Byron’s imagination of literary kinship. Just when he finally allows himself to be identified with his hero, Harold, in the Preface to Canto IV, Byron is accused of writing stanzas ‘that smell strongly of the Lakes’.\(^{16}\) The satire of *Don Juan* is driven by Byron’s desire to separate his isolation from their insularity, but as usual with his post-1816 writing, the poetry opens itself to question.
The Dedication plunges us into the thick of a periodical war in which the identity of various groups is contested. We tend to think of the Lake School, the Satanic School, and the Cockney School as settled entities, but in 1818 Byron was discomforted to find himself grouped by the Quarterly Review with ‘men of the most opposite habits, tastes, and opinions in life and poetry ... Moore, Byron, Shelley, Hazlitt, Haydon, Leigh Hunt, Lamb—what resemblance do ye find among all or any of these men?’ Byron asked Murray, ‘how could any sort of system or plan be carried on, or attempted amongst them?’

Byron was referring to the Quarterly’s review of Leigh Hunt’s Foliage, published in June 1818, in which Shelley was attacked ‘in an oblique and shabby manner’. The other poets listed by Byron were not named in the review, but were all recipients of Huntian Epistles in Foliage. The ‘Epicurean system’ detected by the reviewer was characterized by challenges to Christianity, pollution of marriage, and a ‘mysterious feeling ... which consecrates, and draws to closer intimacy the communion of brothers and sisters’.

Byron believed the reviewer to be Southey because he had already been responsible for promulgating rumours of incest:

I understand the scoundrel said, on his return from Switzerland two years ago, that ‘Shelley and I were in a league of Incest, etc., etc.’ He is a burning liar! for the women to whom he alludes are not sisters – one being Godwin’s daughter, by Mary Wollstonecraft, and the other daughter of the present (second) Mrs. G, by a former husband; and in the next place, if they had even been so, there was no promiscuous intercourse whatever.
The review referred to incest, and mentioned that Shelley had signed himself as an atheist in a Swiss inn album, but Byron missed the reference which identified the author as a contemporary of Shelley’s at Eton: the rest of the article simply accorded too well with Byron’s established view of Southey. In the paranoid and vindictive world of the periodicals, reviewers were suspicious about organized groups of poets, and poets were mistrustful about the agendas of anonymous reviews. Byron was morbidly interested in the way he was treated by the periodical press, especially after 1816, but his treatment was not exceptional. Although he received more coverage than his Romantic-period contemporaries, hostile reviews used similarly alienating language to outlaw any perceived threat. Reviewing *Frankenstein* in the same issue of the *Quarterly*, Croker detected all the signs of another pernicious school:

> Our readers will guess from this summary, what a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity this work presents. – It is piously dedicated to Mr. Godwin, and is written in the spirit of his school ... Mr. Godwin is the patriarch of a literary family ... His disciples are a kind of out pensioners of Bedlam, and, like ‘Mad Bess’ or ‘Mad Tom,’ are occasionally visited with paroxysms of genius and fits of expression, which makes sober-minded people wonder and shudder.  

*(p.200)* Madness is one of the standard accusations that the Tory press levelled at literature of sensibility. Byron adopts this mode of attack himself when he writes in the Dedication to *Don Juan* of Wordsworth’s writing being counted as poetry only ‘when the dogstar rages’ (st. 4). While the ‘Epicurean system’ was the invention of the Tory press, the ‘Lake School’ was, of course, the invention of the liberal Whig, Francis Jeffrey. Thomas Love Peacock called the same group ‘the Cumberland poets’, a tag which didn’t catch on; nevertheless, Peacock’s gossipy letters to Shelley were probably the source for Byron’s venomous note about Wordsworth ‘lick[ing] up the crumbs’ from Lonsdale’s table: ‘Wordsworth dines every day at Lord Lonsdale’s’, Peacock had informed them. Byron’s orientation of his satiric voice towards Jeffrey’s Whig point of view tells us a lot about his vulnerability as an exiled literary lion in 1818.
Francis Jeffrey had attacked the new poetic ‘School’ of Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge as early as October 1802, in the first issue of the Edinburgh Review, as he dismissed Southey’s Thalaba; and the triadic grouping was well enough established for Byron to use it in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers in 1809. Jeffrey’s continuing desire to outlaw Southey’s coterie lay behind belittling Edinburgh Review references to the ‘Lakers’ in 1814 and the ‘Lake School’ in 1816. The label stuck, and Coleridge vainly denied the idea of a collective in a note to Biographia Literaria (1817), Chapter III:

Some years ago, … the chief writer and conductor of a celebrated review … spent a day or two at Keswick. That he was … treated with every hospitable attention by Mr Southey and myself, I trust I need not say … He was likewise circumstantially informed by what series of accidents it had happened, that Mr Wordsworth, Mr Southey, and I had become neighbours; and how utterly unfounded was the supposition, that we considered ourselves, as belonging to any common school.24

Coleridge’s protestations sound as defensive and ridiculous here as Byron does in 1818, when he splits hairs about the exact degree of sorority between Mary Godwin and Claire Clairmont. In the Dedication to Don Juan, we hear Byron’s merciless instinct for a Coleridgean weak spot, but it is an insecurity that Byron shares because it is part of his own exiled situation. Byron wilfully ignores Coleridge’s ‘explanation’ and persists in (p.201) reading the Lakers through Jeffrey’s eyes. This biographical misconstruction takes place in tandem with the composition of Byron’s memoirs, in which Byron attempted to put the record of his own life straight. As his library sale catalogues suggest, Byron had always been interested in the genre of biography, but during his exile in 1816, Byron’s interest becomes bound up with a heightened anxiety about constructions of his own life. Biography, he thought, should be accurate about his friends—he tells Moore in September 1818: ‘[i]n writing the Life of Sheridan, never mind the angry lies of the humbug whigs’, but he could be agreeably partisan about everyone else. In the same month, he tells Hobhouse that he thinks Johnson’s Lives of the Poets ‘the type of perfection’.25
We can see the extent to which Byron borrowed the mantle of Jeffrey in his satiric portrait of Wordsworth, ‘and his new system to perplex the sages’ (st. 4). Leaving aside the question of whether Wordsworth is speaking in his own voice in the Preface to *The Excursion*, or in the persona of the poet of *The Recluse* (which is the invention of Coleridge), it is important to establish that Wordsworth did not announce a system; what he actually said was:

> It is not the Author’s intention formally to announce a system: it was more animating to him to proceed in a different course; and if he shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself.\(^{26}\)

Jeffrey, however, had identified a system in 1802, and he found it again in 1814. In the *Dedication*, Byron, writing from exile in Italy, borrows the satiric denomination of Wordsworth and the Lake School that is the stock-in-trade of the Scottish journals of the day. It is Jeffrey’s review of *The Excursion* that points out the dangers of ‘deep seclusion’ for the Lake School poets.\(^{27}\) *Blackwood’s* complains about Coleridgean metaphysics and compares the delusions of *Biographia* with Joanna Southcote.\(^{28}\)\(^{(p.202)}\) *The Edinburgh Review* first asks Southey in 1817: ‘What would the worthy Laureate be at?’\(^{29}\) Like the Scottish journalists he copied, Byron writes as if from the centre of British culture, but the stridency of his attack underscores his own ambiguous position, in a different form of ‘deep seclusion’ in Italy, at a distance from the London literary scene and not securely belonging to any one group.
Paul Magnuson has written illuminatingly about these overlaps (they are not quite allusions) as Byron’s successful creation of a public voice: ‘The style of the Dedication originates in the public media, and the public standing of both Byron and Southey is at stake’.\textsuperscript{30} Byron, Magnuson argues, ‘speaks the language of others because he wishes to locate himself among them and prove that he, and not Southey, Wordsworth, or Coleridge, is the representative English poet who has the authority to define poetry for the age’.\textsuperscript{31} I would suggest that Byron is not quite so sure about the ‘among others’ principle: the Dedication is a work of self-definition, but, as McGann reminds us, the explosion of Juvenalian invective in stanzas 11–16 shatters the Horatian middle style of the beginning.\textsuperscript{32} McGann sees the Castlereagh stanzas as generically ‘problematic’, and we might develop this observation to suggest that in this rupture of the Dedication, and the marginalia that surrounds it, Byron reveals the exile’s troubled sense of identity and tradition.

In his letters throughout 1817 and 1818, Byron is intensely concerned with settling old scores from the past (‘Nemesis’) and with the judgements of posterity. The two forces coincide in his treatment of Southey, but Byron is aware that neither Nemesis nor posterity can be counted on. The unpredictable outcomes of allusion tell us why this is the case. In stanzas 10 and 11, as he shifts into Juvenalian voice, Byron invokes Milton as a key figure of integrity in isolation. McGann notes that in these stanzas, Byron is responding to Coleridge’s remarks on Milton in \textit{Biographia Literaria}, Chapter II.\textsuperscript{33} In this chapter, Coleridge celebrates the independence of genius:

\begin{quote}
My mind is not capable of forming a more august conception, than arises from the contemplation of this great man in his latter days; poor, sick, old, blind, slandered, persecuted ... yet still listening to the music of his own thoughts, or ... cheered only by the prophetic faith of two or three solitary individuals.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}
Coleridge goes on to pride himself that ‘the original sin of my character consists in a careless indifference to public opinion, and to the attacks of those who influence it’. Or so he claimed in Chapter II. As we have seen in Chapter III, however, Coleridge was not indifferent to public opinion, and, when it ran against him, would expend considerable rhetorical effort in return. Part of his attack on the reviewers in *Biographia* was a defence of Southey. Coleridge compared Southey favourably with the young Milton in *Biographia*, Chapter III, and in a piece of tit-for-tat retaliation, Byron produces a damning comparison:

Think’st thou, could he – the blind old man – arise  
Like Samuel from the grave to freeze once more  
The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,  
Or be alive again – again all hoar  
With time and trials, and those helpless eyes  
And heartless daughters – worn and pale and poor – *  
Would he adore a sultan? he obey  
The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh? (st. 11)

The scornful sibilance of the stanza, with its echo of freeze in ‘prophecies’, and the subterranean memory of *King Lear* in ‘helpless eyes/And heartless daughters’ blasts the flimsy allegiances of Coleridge and Southey. If, however, we stay for too long with Milton (which is only possible when the verse is read, not read aloud), it all begins to look less clear-cut. Byron’s note to line 86, ‘Pale, but not cadaverous’, takes us into the heart of an 18th-century battle over Milton’s identity.

Byron tells us in that note that he has Hayley’s *Life of Milton* (Basil (sic) 1799) by him: ‘Hayley compares him to Lear.—See Part III. Life of Milton, by W. Hayley (or Hailey, as spelt in the edition before me)’. The final parenthesis draws attention to an orthographical error, which might be a piece of Shandean whimsicality on Byron’s part, given the usual spatial confinement of the footnote. But by drawing attention to the way that a name can become misspelt during a lifetime (Hayley died in 1820), this note highlights the contingencies of history and the perennial problem of how to get hold of English books while living in exile. In particular, Byron’s attention to Hayley’s volume underlines the fragility of reputation and authorial identity.
At the time it was written, Hayley’s biography was competing with Samuel Johnson’s *Life* to provide the authoritative account of Milton’s character and aesthetic achievement. Milton was effectively an internal exile in England in 1660 and many writers made comparisons between Milton and Dante. Ugo Foscolo, for example, wrote that ‘Dante was ... like Milton, one of those rare individuals who are above the reach of ridicule, and whose natural dignity is exalted even by the blows of malignity’. Hazlitt saw Milton’s manliness as issuing from his political partisanship: ‘[i]n this respect Milton resembles Dante, (the only modern writer with whom he has any thing in common) and it is remarkable that Dante, as well as Milton, was a political partisan’. Both Johnson and Hayley quote the description of Milton ‘in a small chamber hung with rusty green, sitting in an elbow chair, and dressed neatly in black, pale but not cadaverous, his hands and fingers gouty’. But that portrait of the old man alone in his study is open to two very different interpretations of internal motivation.

It is hard now to think of Milton’s public image as being mired in controversy, but Hayley’s book was written to defend the sublime Milton against Johnson and other critics who had raised questions about Milton’s domestic situation, the question of whether he should have retained a place under Cromwell, and the matter of his poetic style. Johnson, of course, felt that Milton ‘wrote no language, but has formed ... a Babylonish Dialect, in itself harsh and barbarous’. Johnson attributed this ‘peculiarity’ to ‘Milton’s familiarity with the Tuscan poets’: ‘the disposition of his words is’, Johnson thought, ‘frequently Italian; perhaps sometimes combined with other tongues’. Johnson’s infamous linguistic and stylistic objections to Milton anticipate the approach to Byron’s next target, Castlereagh: ‘An orator of such set trash of phrase/Ineffably, legitimately vile’. Or is this really Castlereagh? We have, of course, heard that ‘trash of phrase’ before in Byron’s letters, directed against Leigh Hunt and his poetic ‘system’ in the battle over Pope’s craftsmanship. The accusation of being linguistically inept was, as we have seen, one of the conservative objections to Byron’s own poetry, and was also levelled at Byron by Landor, whose satiric version of Byron in the *Conversation* between Bishop Burnet and Humphrey Hardcastle turned him into the ‘reputed child’ of Lord Rochester, ‘George Nelly’.
In fact, he had invented new rhymes in profusion, by such words as trackschuyt, Wageninghen, Skiermonikoog, Bergen-op-Zoom, and whatever is appertaining to the market-places of fish, flesh, fowl, flowers, and legumes, not to omit the dockyards and barracks and ginsshops, with various essences and drugs.\textsuperscript{44}

Landor’s portrait of Byron as the poet who ‘on a sudden ... cried out at the Haymarket, \textit{there is no God}’ represents a spectacular merger of him with Percy Bysshe Shelley.\textsuperscript{45} It is satirically unscrupulous and very funny at the same time. The Dedication to \textit{Don Juan} is similarly opportunistic, and full of noises that remind the reader how precarious poetic reputation is, and how embattled the use of English may be, especially for poets who are perceived to have left, or have been forced to leave, their native shore.

More than one literary controversy rears its head in Hayley’s \textit{Life of Milton}. The book is dedicated to Joseph Warton, and in the Preface, Hayley comments on Warton’s ‘entertaining and instructive’ essay on Pope. Byron’s digressive reference holds the seeds of the Pope-Bowles controversy that Byron will join publicly in 1821. In 1818, Castlereagh’s crimes against humanity seem to matter at least as much as his crimes against the English language. Layerings of poetic voices ensure that Castlereagh is weirdly a stalking horse for the ‘new School of Critics & Scribblers’ who depreciate Pope. The attack on Castlereagh’s use of language reclaims an English tradition of writing to which Byron aspires, but from which he feels he has been displaced. Castlereagh is ‘legitimately vile’ because, as Byron kept on reminding himself in his letter to Moore, however infuriating Leigh Hunt might seem, he was ‘a good man, and a good father, a good husband, a good friend’.\textsuperscript{46} Castlereagh is to the liberal Whigs a thorough villain, an ‘it’, not a man. But Byron does not push the attack on Castlereagh fully forward in 1818, and this hesitation is, I think, a mark of Byron’s ambiguous position as an exile.
The fact that the Dedication was not published with Cantos I and II is almost always presented as an act of censorship, gradually pressed on Byron by his friends once the poem reached England. As Byron wrote up the fair copy in September 1818, however, and well before he received the representations from Murray’s advisers, he anticipated Murray’s reluctance (p.206) to publish the attack on Castlereagh. Just after attacking Southey for his strategic change of tack, Byron offered an alternative couplet ending to stanza 11, with an often overlooked note to his publisher in the margin: ‘Mr John Murray—As publisher to the Admiralty and of various Government works—if the five Stanzas concerning Castlereagh should risk your ears or the Navy List you may omit them in the publication—in that case the two last lines of stanza 10 [11] must end with the couplet inserted per margin ‘; Byron then languidly scored through the Castlereagh section with pen lines that look a bit like a Union Jack, so that the stanzas underneath are cancelled, but still visible (see Figure 1, in the Introduction to this volume). The ghostly nature of the attack mirrors Byron’s position as one of several ‘voices off’ the English public scene. ‘What you will’, the manuscript tells Murray, and then makes Murray responsible for the appearance (or not) of ‘plain truth’. The intensity of the quarrel, and the ultimate insecurity of the pitch at the audience, defines the satirical voice of the exiled Regency-period Romantics, in which the stylistic flamboyance and urgent demand to be heard is matched only by the anxiety of the poet who has become a disembodied voice.

Landor, Satire, and the Law
Although he was very fond of Robert Southey, Landor shared the jaundiced views of Byron and Shelley about popularity, which he thought was usually mistaken for fame in the same way that power was mistaken for greatness: ‘They whom their flatterers, and History is the least pardonable of them all, call the Great, such as Alexander, and Pompeius, Frederick of Prussia, and Napoleon Bonaparte, were deficient in every kind of goodness, and even of common honesty.’\textsuperscript{47} Nevertheless, as Regina Hewitt points out, Landor’s determination to write the \textit{Imaginary Conversations} ‘in English and seek an English publisher is itself significant, for it departs from the preference for European languages and publishers he had shown since moving abroad in 1814’.\textsuperscript{48} Landor’s imaginary conversations are written in an English that crackles with a delight in the peculiar sounds of language itself. Language is often the actual topic of conversation, as we can hear when Johnson and Tooke debate orthography and etymology:

\textbf{(p.207)} TOKE:

What think you of \textit{swough}, the long continued sound of wind?
‘a swough
As thof a storme should brasten every bough.’ (Palamon and Arcite)

JOHNSON:

It sounds grandly: there is something of a melancholy and a lonely wildness in it.

TOKE:

The Scotch retain it still, spelling it \textit{sugh}.

JOHNSON:

Let them keep it, sir, to themselves. I would not give a straw for it. We want neither harsh words nor obsolete ones.\textsuperscript{49}
Elizabeth Barrett thought Landor’s ‘very spelling of English ... uncommon and theoretic’, as if he resisted assimilation with even as basic a premise as orthography.\textsuperscript{50} According to De Quincey’s articles on Landor in \textit{Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine} in 1847, Landor’s oddity is due to the fact that his ‘residence in Italy has injured his sense of discrimination’.\textsuperscript{51} Landor’s perception of false delicacy among the English is, De Quincey claims, because Landor ‘has grown in Italy more tolerant of what is really a blameable coarseness’; De Quincey defines this as the journalistic temptations of ‘apparent strength that lurk in plain speaking or even in brutality’, and he observes that Landor is the sort of person who would settle the question of the spelling of a word with ‘a stand-up fight’.\textsuperscript{52} Exile in Italy is, therefore, seen to be the cause of Landor’s strangely literary and bluntly colloquial mutations of the English language. Although the Italian language was famed for a liquid softness that De Quincey, for one, associated with the culture of music and opera, residence in Italy might make an English writer more harsh, crude, and combative.

Building on George Becker’s 1938 discussion of Landor’s political purpose, Hewitt suggests that the \textit{Imaginary Conversations} were produced with the aim of ‘promoting acceptance of contention’.\textsuperscript{53} In the 1820s, she argues, the contentiousness of public life was seen to pose a threat ‘because of its resemblance to French Revolutionary challenges to political and social order’. Landor’s purpose, according to Hewitt, was to familiarize (p.208) contentiousness, thus removing a barrier to social change. In order to do this, Landor had to overturn a settled view of the past:

The rewriting of history changes the perceived dynamics of contention and order. Instead of showing a pattern of deference to authority occasionally broken by contention. It shows a pattern of contention occasionally impeded by deference to authority. Thus incorporated into the past, the contentiousness in Landor’s present was no longer a novel and disruptive event.\textsuperscript{54}
This reading is not altogether incompatible with Robert Pinsky’s view that Landor’s poetry is all about the ‘calm of antiquity’ and ‘the remote, invulnerable quality of the past’.\(^{55}\) The ‘contention’ that Landor recreates in his imaginary dialogues is not always inflammatory, but more a type of ‘profound and continued reasoning’, the ‘ragionamenti’ of Boccaccio and Petrarch, that applies mental energy to the inevitable impasses and blockages of tyranny.\(^{56}\) As well as the intellectual process of involving oneself and one’s readers in dialogue, Landor believed that writers had a duty to transmit examples of political integrity from the past and the present to counter the lamentable shortcomings of contemporary politicians. After the genius of Burke, he complained, the Whigs had dwindled into ‘an oligarchy of gamesters and adventurers’.\(^{57}\) Landor despaired of English negotiations with the Bourbons on the grounds that it was like watching hapless aristocrats at a club writing off the losses of an irresponsible gambler and then offering to underwrite him again:

> The English are the only people in the Universe that ever played voluntarily this losing game. They sit down to it quietly, night after night, to the astonishment of their observers, the despair of their friends, and the derision of their adversaries.\(^{58}\)

To a greater degree than his fellow Romantic exiles, Landor voiced a patriotic commitment to England, and he was ready to identify himself as English, even when nationality was a matter of embarrassment. Writing an open letter to the Hungarian exile, Kossuth, in the *Examiner* in 1849, Landor requested, ‘Do not trample on this paper for being written by an Englishman. We are not all of us jugglers and dupes’.\(^{59}\) Surveying the fate (p.209) of Italy in 1856, Landor adopted the first person plural to castigate English foreign policy:

> We English are the most censurable of all... The ministers of England have signed that *Holy Alliance* which delivered every free State to the domination of arbitrary and irresponsible despots. The ministers of England have entered more recently into treaties with usurpers and assassins. And now, forsooth, it is called *assassination* to remove from the earth an assassin; the assassin of thousands; an outlaw, the subverter of his country’s, and even of his own laws. The valiant and the wise of old thought differently.\(^{60}\)
Doubtful law

As A. LaVonne Ruoff has suggested, Landor’s sense of identity is predicated on a Ciceronian concept of patriotism. He had been excited by the discovery of portions of *De Republica* in the Vatican library in 1820 and researched the manuscripts himself. Landor’s historical writing seeks to keep alive the inheritance of Roman republican virtù to set against 19th-century real politik. This explains his views about the difference between tyrannicide and assassination, which are voiced in the letter to Emerson, where Landor also decries the way that Italy has been ‘torn in pieces’. We can hear his stringent attention to misrepresentation and misnomer over and over again in *Imaginary Conversations*.

Landor’s poetry and prose form an elegant single span and a *Ponte Vecchio*, respectively, between then and now. His efforts to overcome temporal distance make use of what Joseph Priestley commended in Plutarch’s ‘judicious mixture both of private characteristic incidents, and of public transactions’. The characteristic mode of *Imaginary Conversations* is to focus on a telling domestic interlude in the middle of major public event, a technique that is consistent with Landor’s own literary criticism. Ordinary minds, he argues, fail to grasp the greatest achievements of poetry:

> Tens of thousands were animated by the battles of the ‘Iliad’ for one who struck his brow at the agony of Priam, or who prayed for the return of Hector when he lifted up his child, frightened at the radiance of his helmet.

Landor’s prose forges connections of human sympathy by inviting his readers to step into the mental space of historical agents, and of those who received their orders or their confidences. In the dramatic medium of conversational exchange, Hewitt suggests, ‘[r]ole-taking is the alternative to gazing down at others from some distant elevation that Landor associated with monarchies and aristocracies that he so despised’. As an individual, he might have remained ‘[a]part and above’, as Elwin presents him, but his prose exhibited ‘principles and ideas … where people can see them best, and are most inclined to look at them’.

*P.210*
Landor does not exactly ‘rewrite history’—as a well-read classicist, he was always alert to the different versions of history that are available: ‘Plutarch, in his *Problems*, offers several reasons, each different from this’, he informs the reader in a footnote to the dialogue between Cicero and his brother. Instead, Landor poses the direct questions that would occur to liberals who had lived through the 1790s and situates them in the context of domestic interludes that could reasonably be assumed to have occurred amid seismic historical events (the technique of most historical novels and films today).67 History, language, and law are recurring topics of discussion, punctuated with peculiar details that interrupt the passage of ‘great’ events with a register of the effect of those events on the lives of women and children.

Landor’s feminine angle of vision is evident throughout his career; in his interest in the psychology of Milton’s Eve, for example, Charles L. Proudfit argues that he is ‘unique among Milton’s early commentators’.68 Landor’s attention to the disruption of the domestic is also evident in his five dramatic scenes on the subject of Beatrice Cenci, published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1851, and republished in *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree* (1853), before he left England for his second period of exile. Although he separates his work from Shelley’s in the Preface, Landor follows Shelley in establishing Count Cenci’s private financial arrangement with the Pope in the opening scene. The Count outlines a possible future sin, and his confessor calculates the cost of a pardon: ‘The very thought confounds and petrifies me./Ten yokes of oxen, fifty casks of wine/(Were it Orvieto), scarcely would efface/Such scandal’.69 After this Browningesque exposé of Catholic corruption, Landor’s next four scenes all focus on Beatrice: talking with her maid; listening to the peasants singing, and conversing (p. 211) with the steward who meets Count Cenci on his return; being questioned by the Pope after killing her father; and finally, her torture and execution, which is watched by citizens ‘at a distance from the scaffold’.70
While the Count’s language is assured and almost idly speculative (‘My speech is free’), Beatrice’s modesty and sense of duty to her family are established through linguistic awkwardness and formality. When she faces the Pope, she cannot give her family name and falters over the use of the word ‘father’. Unable to define Cenci’s unspeakable crime, Beatrice can only assert, not substantiate, her own innocence, despite the Pope’s threats of torture:

BEATRICE:

Holy Father! I have borne
That rack already which tears filial love
From love parental. Is there worse behind?

In the final scene, Landor plays on the distance between Beatrice and the spectators. Beatrice’s words are indistinct; only the sound of the bells and the scourge carry clearly across to the crowd. The dramatic tension of this scene comes from the uncertainty over whether or not the surrogate audience of citizens will receive any intelligence about why Beatrice was driven to parricide:

ANOTHER CITIZEN:

Spake she no words at all?
ANOTHER:

These words she spake,
Caught by the nearest, then farthest off,
And striking every breast throughout the square,
Rapid as lightning, withering too like that.
ANOTHER:

Well, well the words?
REPLY:

hast thou alone not heard?
Hear now then. No confession; not a breath.
OLD WOMAN:

Poor sinful soul!
CITIZEN:

They urged: she only said —
And scarcely one or two could hear the sound,
It was so feeble — for her heart was broken
Worse than her limbs.
FORMER CITIZEN:

What said she?

LAST CITIZEN:

Wouldst thou torture
Worse than yon paid ones?

FORMER CITIZEN:

Hold thy peace! The two
Confessors urged her on each side to speak

(p.212) While time was left her, and while God might hear,
And leave the rest to them. She thus replied”
‘My father’s honor will’d my father’s death:
He could not live; no, nor could I. Now strike.
Strike, and let questioning’s worse torture cease.’
The vizor’d struck: a dull sound shook the block:
The head roll’d from it. Mercy on her soul!
Men have been brave, but women have been braver.74

This is the end of the play. Landor’s dramatic focus is on the transmission of affect. To this end, he borrows a detail from the execution scene of Byron’s *Marino Faliero*, where the crowd strains to hear, but fails to ‘catch the sound’ of Faliero’s last words; as the sword falls in Byron’s play, ‘the People murmur’ and one citizen remarks to another, ‘The gory head rolls down the Giant’s Steps!’(V.4.29). Landor’s scene initiates a crucial development in that, even knowing only half of Beatrice’s story, the people instinctively side with her, creating a current of sympathy that flows across the public square and out to Landor’s readers. Rather than a set of instructions about how to instigate ameliorative social action, the driving force of Landor’s dramatic conversations is the willed transmission of sympathy. Sympathetic impulses might be translated into action, but satirical audience reflection on historical inaction or failure to implement reform might also fortify political opposition to the *status quo*. Either way, political consciousness is born in the affective power of literature.
Landor’s dialogues usually embrace an eclectic mix of characters, ranging widely over different cultures and times, but the Imaginary Conversations of Greeks and Romans was gathered separately, arranged with Greek Dialogues in Part I and Roman Dialogues in Part II. The volume was dedicated to Charles Dickens in recognition of his labours ‘in breaking up and cultivating the unreclaimed wastes of Humanity’. It is tempting to see homage to Plutarch as well in this structure, for there is a doubling of political and cultural concerns across the two parts. The collection is also reminiscent of the use of public lectures on historical republican subjects during the 1790s, when the Gagging Acts prevented open discussion of political issues, so reformists had to resort to classical analogy to enable limited discussion of the process of government. The conservative satirist, T. J. Mathias, complained bitterly about Thelwall’s classical lectures in 1796, in which he pointed out the defects of all the ancient governments ... and the causes of rebellion, insurrection, regeneration of governments, terrorism, massacres, (p.213) and revolutionary murders, without the least hint or application to England and its constitution, shewing how the Gracchi were great men, and so by implication, the Bedfords, the Lauderdaleals, &c.75

Mathias’s outrage at ‘classick rav[ing]’ indicates that Thelwall’s technique was extremely effective.

In the dialogues between Marcus Tullius and Quinctus Cicero, Aristoteles and Callisthenes, Diogenes and Plato, Lucian and Timotheus, and Epicurus, Leontion, and Ternissa, Landor’s speakers ruminate on the nature of government, the rule of law, and the role of the historian. The length of these pieces makes it difficult to quote from them effectively, which is partly Landor’s point: modern politics is glib; modern political debates are curtailed by specious procedure. The Imaginary Conversations recreate an upper house of more spacious and considered discourse, as if Landor were welding the form of philosophical dialogue with what used to be called Shakespeare’s ‘problem plays’. A single extract from ‘Aristoteles and Callisthenes’ will convey the way that Landor debates the problematic role of the historian in ethical and aesthetic contexts:
aristoteles: If I blame Herodotus, whom can I commend? He reminds me of Homer by his facility and his variety, and by the suavity and fulness of his language. His view of history was, nevertheless, like that of the Asiatics, who write to instruct and please. Now truly there is little that could instruct, and less that could please us, in the actions and speeches of barbarians, from among whom the kings alone come forth distinctly. Delightful tales and apposite speeches are the best things you could devise; and many of these undoubtedly were current in the East, and were collected by Herodotus; some, it is probable, were invented by him. It is of no importance to the world whether the greater part of historical facts, in such countries, be true or false; but they may be rendered of the highest, by the manner in which a writer of genius shall represent them. If history were altogether true, it would be not only undignified, but unsightly: great orators would often be merely the mouth-pieces of prostitutes, and great captains would be hardly more than gladiators or buffoons. The prime movers of those actions which appall and shake the world, are generally the vilest things in it; and the historian, if he discovers them, must conceal them or hold them back.76

This passage anticipates the argument that Robert Browning stages between the poet-narrator and the reader in Books I and XII of The Ring (p.214) and the Book. In these framing addresses to the reader, Browning stresses the interpretive role of the poet and the importance of art being wrought out of ‘pure crude fact’ (I, 86), but going ‘beyond the facts’ (XII, 866).77 For Landor and Browning, the heavily emphasized and portentous ‘ultimate/Judgement’ (I, 120–1) of the reader is mobilized by the transmissive powers of the poet. The poet, therefore, has the authority to manufacture truth from a blend of fact and fiction, or ore and alloy. The increasingly competitive alloys of the literary marketplace make Landor and Browning even less sure than Byron and Shelley that they would be recognized as writers of genius, or even (as we shall see below), ‘intelligible to the attentive ear’.
My final Landor case study is the dialogue between Savonarola and the Prior of San Marco, which was published as an Italian pamphlet in 1860, when Landor stipulated that proceeds of the sale should go to the relief of Garibaldi’s wounded soldiers. The English version was found in Landor’s writing-desk after his death and it was published posthumously in 1897. Landor’s scene expands a moment from the Tuscan annals. As with the Cenci adaptation, this Conversation is concerned with tyranny in Papal guise. It begins as the Prior delivers to Savonarola the news that ‘The Holy Father has found thee guilty’; Savonarola questions the Prior’s terminology and wryly admits that his own restrained use of language could be seen to have verged on untruth:

SAVONAROLA:

Alas! How many has he found guilty, and how many has he made so ... Frequently have I preached before the people, but have abstained from declaring this truth, that under the seat of our Roman pontiffs more Christian blood has been shed on behalf of Europe than under all the worst Roman emperors in the whole of it.

PRIOR:

It may be true; but there always is danger in speaking ill of dignitaries.

SAVONAROLA:

If I understand the word, it means the worthy. Before them I stand humiliated, not before the arrogant and presumptuous.78

The exchange foregrounds Landor’s sustained attention to language and his desire to track resistance to tyranny across the ages:

PRIOR:

We men of peace should be silent.

SAVONAROLA:

Not when God commands us to speak and cry aloud ... Dante Alighieri, Petrarcha, Boccaccio, were not only nightingales that (p.215) sang in the dark—which all three did—but they were prophetic, and intelligible to the attentive ear.79
In the interests of making Savonarola into a hero of free speech, Landor conveniently overlooks the fact that his character instigated the burning of Boccaccio’s works on the spot where he is about to be burnt alive. Characteristically, the discussion turns to the nature of discussion itself and Landor airs his habitual criticism of Platonic theory:

PRIOR:

The dialogues of Plato are mostly of no utility, for religion, morality, the sciences or the arts. They resemble the pallone with which our youthful citizens divert themselves, empty, turgid, round, weightless, thrown up into the air by one player, to be caught by another as it falls to the ground, and beaten back, bouncing, and covered with dust. In all his dialogues there is not a single one which impresses on the heart a virtuous or a tender sentiment, none of charity, none of philanthropy, none of patriotism …

SAVONAROLA:

I was reminded by your observations and similitudes of another pastime, in which a girl lays her hand down flat, another claps hers upon it, and thus rapidly and alternately, until both are tired of it, and one gives a slap on the knuckles of her playfellow and runs off laughing.80

Such levity from Savonarola, it becomes apparent, is simply a diversion to prevent the Prior from looking out of the window and seeing the preparations for the human bonfire. When he hears the noise of approaching vehicles, Savonarola addresses the Prior with calm precision:

Those carts are laden with faggots and stakes; one of the stoutest is several ells long. What a number of poor starving creatures might be comforted at Christmas by such a quantity of materials.

The people are impatient for their bonfire, and the priests for their dinner.

...

Turn not again, as thou seemest about to do, toward that window. When the smoke has been carried off by the wind, and the clouds are dissipated, then return to San Marco.81
The use of the word ‘ell’ has a special point: an ‘ell’ is the measure of a length that varies depending on local custom (so English and Scottish ‘ells’ are different). The Tuscan ‘pallone’ in the passage above is glossed for (p.216) the reader, but the exact length of the ell is not worth disputing when a man is about to be burnt at the stake; men have been executed for offending the church in as many different countries as there are ells, so the word, for once, does not need translating, and the lack of a meticulous note tells its own story.

Savonarola expects that ‘The Florentines will soon forget me; already they have forgotten themselves. Oblivion soon comes over cities; memory rests longer on a few faithful hearts’. 82 His acceptance that his memory and words ‘may pass away’ is challenged by the appearance of Landor’s work, as it would be by George Eliot’s Romola, which was written a couple of years later. 83 In Savonarola’s hope that ‘Enervated as they are our Florentines, they will rise and stand firm’, Landor turns over the hopes and fears of the two parts of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Casa Guidi Windows, making Florence a double for Italy and voicing the hope that ‘Italy will not always be what Italy is now’. 84 Despite their strident disagreements over the merits of Napoleon Bonaparte as a leader, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Walter Savage Landor both idealize the Italian figure of the ‘exiled patriot’. 85 Landor’s attempt to galvanize the cause of ‘our Florentines’ by writing in English renews Barrett Browning’s campaign to link ‘our England to his Italy’. 86 It is an identification in which, for these exiles, everything is at stake.

Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book
Robert Browning ends The Ring and the Book with ‘plain ... print’, ‘the definitive verdict of the Court’ (XII, 753–4). Among all the authors whom we have considered, Browning exhibits the most faith in judicial process, despite the manifold ‘inadequacy and inaptitude/Of that self-same machine, that very law’ (XII, 576–77). Browning’s ‘spectators’ witness the brutal execution of a guilty man, not an innocent victim. Unlike Marino Faliero, and Shelley and Landor’s versions of the Cenci, the testimony and all the words spoken by the accused are heard (p.217) and reported, and historical record is entrusted to the reader. The poet places his faith in the unmalleable nature of print, and in the individual acts of resuscitation performed by poet and reader together, rather than the process of oral communication which is presented as being as transient as the memory of the Wormwood Star:

What was once seen, grows what is now described,
Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less
In every fresh transmission; till it melts,
Trickles in silent orange or wan grey
Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark. (XII, 14–18)

Browning’s The Ring and the Book has been read as a mystery, a courtroom drama, and as a work of Romantic Irony. It is all of these things, but it is also a work of exile, pondering the relationship between poet and readers, and the process of poetic transmission. Browning’s idea for the poem came from the ‘square old yellow Book’ he bought in Florence in 1860, but he did not start work on the poem until 1864, after Elizabeth’s death and his move back to London. Browning’s idea for serial publication meant that, at the beginning, he was wary of the poem’s reception, addressing the ‘British public, ye who like me not’ (I, 410, 1379), but by the end of Book XII, he had been gratified by the favourable reviews of the first volumes by the ‘British public, who may like me yet’ (XII, 835). With this framing reflexivity, Browning enfold a Byronic awareness about his relationship with the English audience into the poem.87
When *The Ring and the Book* was published in 1868–9, several critics registered a kind of detachment. The *Spectator* described the narrator of the poem as ‘one outside’, and Walter Bagehot drew attention to the way that Browning was somehow ‘not English’: ‘the colouring of his mind and the colouring of his work are alike Italian’. As if Bagehot had sensed the doubled perspective of the exile in Browning, he points out that ‘there is a recurrent “or” continually in his mind’. One way of describing this ‘or’ might be as a form of Romantic Irony, but I believe that both the ‘or’ and the hypersensitivity of the poet towards ideas of distance mark *The Ring and the Book* as a poem of exile. Browning was aware that almost 15 years of life in Italy had inflected his modes of perception. Even as early as 1847, he wrote to Richard Hengist Horne: *(p.218)*

> The effect of being away from England and in Florence is curious—the loose literature in one’s head *settles* fast, nothing *stays* that should not—but I often find, just when I want it, some grand weighty line of yours—not to speak of general conceptions which also make themselves felt for true and complete*. 88

There is an ontological thrust in the word ‘being’.

Browning suggests that the state of exile allows him to feel the weight of English lines in a new way. This sense of strangeness is conveyed in the introduction to *The Ring and the Book*, which meditates on the effect of being ‘away from England’. The poet sets himself the challenge of reanimating history, ‘despite the distance and the dark—/What was, again may be’ (I, 1390), and in pondering the temporal distance that separates the author from the crisis of Pompilia, Guido, and Giuseppe the priest, he is also reflecting on the distance that separates him from his readers in England and his pre-eminent reader, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose death in 1861 closed the Italian epoch in his existence.
The famous opening of *The Ring and the Book*, ‘Do you see this Ring?’, followed 32 lines later by, ‘Do you see this square old yellow Book … ?’, creates that concentrated attention on the material object that comes with exile—the determination to hold on to something that anchors existence: ‘Give it me back!’ the poet tells the imaginary reader in London who has picked up his treasure, ‘The thing’s restorative/I’ the touch and sight’ (I, 89–90). In this case, the ‘crumpled vellum covers’ holding ‘pure crude fact’ are marked as Italian, and the poet has to translate both the contents (‘When testimony stooped to mother-tongue’ (I, 139)), and the price for his English readers:

I found this book,  
Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just. (I, 38–9)

The in-between nature of Browning’s position, caught between two cultures, is emphasized in his account of the finding of the book in Lorenzo Square in Florence, ‘Twixt palace and church’, ‘Mongst odds and ends’, and then taking it away, ‘Between the outspread straw-work’, ‘Through fire-irons … Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling gear’ (I, 48, 53, 102, 105–7). Still reading the book, he reaches ‘home’ with a plethora of prepositions, ‘In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,/ Under the doorway where the black begins’ (I, 114–15). The poet’s nimble footwork is prefigured in the description of old tapestry on the market stalls, ‘Now offered as a mat to save bare feet/… Treading the chill scagliola bedward’ (I, 64–5), and the first book as a whole plays a delicate game of negotiation between two cultures: ‘Better translate –’ he tells his reader, before giving us the title of the book: ‘A Roman murder-case’, and registering ‘what the practice was,/At Rome’ (I, 148–9), outside the jurisdiction of English law.

Browning fathoms readerly distance along with his temporal distance from the case, and the geographical reach of the story all the way from Arezzo to Rome. He does so by pacing the terrace outside Casa Guidi’s windows:

I turned, to free myself and find the world,  
And stepped out on the narrow terrace, built  
Over the street and opposite the church,  
And paced its lozenge-brickwork. (I, 478–81)
Footwork remains important: recording the ‘busy human sense beneath my feet’ (I, 493), Browning gazes: ‘Over the roof o’the lighted church ... /A bowshot to the street’s end, north away/ Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road’ (I, 497–9). After describing the clutter of 19th-century market stalls, Browning’s anachronistic choice of the bow shot as a guide works (albeit fleetingly) to recall Dante’s measure of dispossession. The poet passes through the various stages of his narrative and then experiences the striking obliteration of distance as imaginative life breathes into the old book:

The life in me abolished the death of things,
Deep calling unto deep: as then and there
Acted itself over again once more
The tragic piece. I saw with my own eyes
In Florence as I trod the terrace. (I, 520–4)

With the allusion to Psalms, Browning summons an image of vast space and time under the eye of God and the poet, only to collapse these epochs into the moment of readerly interpretation. At its beginning and end, the poem reflects on the process of human judgement and the nature of fallibility, which is why the Pope is such an important character, and presented more sympathetically than Shelley or Landor’s popes. Human error, Browning suggests, is as inescapable as original sin, and although the historian strives to stand apart from this flawed perception, he is inextricably part of the mire and bias:

But human promise, oh, how short of shine!
How topple down the piles of hope we rear!
How history proves ... nay, read Herodotus! (I, 295–7).
Beginning with Morse Peckham’s discussion of historiography in the poem, many critics have debated the importance of the transmission of history in *The Ring and the Book*. Britta Martens reminds us that Browning offered the Old Yellow Book to the historian William Cornwallis Cartwright, and to the novelists, Charlotte Ogle and Anthony Trollope, as if unsure about whether or not poetry was the appropriate genre for the story. Martens’s emphasis on Browning’s consciousness of his own intermediary position between different schools of history, and different degrees of popularity with the English public, is shrewd. She suggests that the ‘relationship between the speaker “Browning” and the author is … one of simultaneous proximity and distance’. Browning’s troubled sense of his own authority and his self-conscious steps in the poem are linked, I suggest, with the mingled awkwardness and authority of the exiled outsider that we have seen traced by Dante, Boccaccio, and Plutarch, and then by the Pisan circle and Landor.

Beginning with the certainties of early Roman law on adultery, as recorded by Plutarch: ‘How legislated now, in this respect,/Solon and his Athenians? Quote the code/Of Romulus and Rome!’ (I, 221–3), Browning quickly moves from the annals of Roman law to drama, where legal codes are complicated by the affective power of testimony and the implicit jury that appears in the shape of the audience: ‘Let this old woe step on the stage again!/Act itself o’er anew for men to judge’ (I, 824–5). At the end of the story, Browning returns to the print of the Old Yellow Book, along with letters of his own invention, to show how nearly Guido was pardoned, and how accidentally Pompilia’s name was cleared. The venal motives of the lawyers are enjoyed in much the same way that Browning relishes the worldliness of the Bishop ordering his tomb. And yet, as with the Bishop’s connoisseurship, something valuable emerges in the lengthy transmission of a formal process from a different age. Out of the friction of the arguments of law and chicanery of the advocates comes something that looks like justice because it can ‘breed the thought’ (XII, 860).
Old woe ‘fades from memory’, Browning notes, but after *The Ring and the Book*, ‘it lives’ (XII, 830, 833). As with Landor’s conversations, the process of immersion in the arguments, all the ‘ampollosity’ of the speakers, and the tracking of the prosecution of justice from another time, force the reader to be self-aware about his or her role as spectator and judge. (p. 221) The role of the poet is more than annalist or conveyancer, and the effect of the poem is more than the message that he summarizes for us:

> that our human speech is naught,
> Our human testimony false, our fame
> And human estimation words and wind. (XII, 838–40)

Instead, Browning argues, ‘Art may tell a truth/Obliquely’ (XII, 859–60). The obliquity of the artist comes in no small part from his position as an exile, and it is telling that he returns at the very end to the other tangible ‘thing’ that is paired with the Old Yellow Book, the golden ring ‘without a posy’, the wordless talisman of his time in another place, and to the most insubstantial thing of all—music.

> So, note, by note, bring music from your mind,
> Deeper than ever e’en Beethoven dived. (XII, 864–5)

‘Note by note’ echoes the ‘step by step’ motif that recurs throughout *The Ring and the Book*, capturing the hesitant onward progress that Percy Shelley divined in Dante’s *Paradiso*, in which by ‘gradations of love’, he suggests, ‘as by steps [Dante] feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause’. Michael O’Neill comments that the ‘as by steps’ phrase gives us ‘a way of grasping the fictionalizing, the feigning that elicits imaginative truth’. It also conveys the image of the tentative outsider who—like Landor—is acutely aware of ‘how hard is the way up and down another man’s stairs’. In the first edition of Book XII, Browning had written ‘Deeper than e’en the Andante dived’, and this revision subtly intensifies the case that is made for poetry, while completing the last link in a chain of connection between the experience of exiled life in Italy and London.
Beethoven was tantamount to a form of religion for Elizabeth. In 1846, she wrote to tell Robert that there was music that ‘lifts the hair on my head, I feel it so much’, but she confessed that she had only ever heard private piano recitals, so that although she felt that ‘Beethoven must stand … nearest to the true poet’, this was a ‘guess’. She felt Beethoven’s divinity, she insisted, long before meeting Browning, ‘[b]ut observe how, if I had died in this illness, I should have left a sealed world behind me!’ In 1852, when they visited Paris, the Brownings attended a performance of Beethoven by musicians from the Conservatoire. It was the first time that Elizabeth had heard the Quartets, and she wrote, ‘[i]t moved me so profoundly … that scarcely I could keep from fainting. The music seemed relentless . . as if it were rending you body from soul’.

Browning confessed that he had been ‘surprised’ by her response, but perhaps it was not so strange: the performance had occurred at a highly charged time after their first visit back to England since the elopement. There, the Brownings had immersed themselves in English culture; they visited Crystal Palace with Anna Jameson and listened to Fanny Kemble reading Hamlet. Robert had written to Elizabeth’s father in an attempt to initiate a reconciliation, but Edward Barrett was unyielding: ‘There was a violent reply’, Elizabeth eventually reported, ‘together with two packets enclosing all the letters I had written in the course of five years, seals unbroken’. She was profoundly shaken by ‘the sight of those poor letters’ and the ‘black unbroken seals’, which proved to her that she had been ‘cast … off for ever’. In this context, the name of Beethoven summons a Titanic force of affect: rather than ‘the sealed up heart which refused to be opened’, Beethoven is the one of the strongest proofs which Elizabeth possesses of the artist’s ability to move and be moved.
When Browning invokes Beethoven at the end of *The Ring and the Book*, he recollects the overwhelming physicality of Elizabeth’s response to the music and the intangibility of that presence now. ‘Beethoven’ is simultaneously evidence of survival and an echo of what has gone forever. Arezzo, the origin of the Franceschini murder case, ‘the man’s town … spectacle for angels’ (I, 501–4), was also the place where musical notation began. By inventing the first form of the stave and making it possible for men to write music, rather than having to remember it by rote, a different Guido of Arezzo initiated the process of transmission that made musical interpretation possible. Browning was not necessarily aware of this coincidence, but alluding to Beethoven by name, his revision at the very end of *The Ring and the Book* introduces a train of particular associations—both personal and public—to advance the Brownings’ almost heretical belief that printed poetry surpasses music as the art form most able to penetrate its listener, and release the sealed world of another consciousness.

Notes:
(1) *PBSL* II, 36–7, 283.
(2) *BLJ* VII, 146.
(4) ‘I shall not avail myself of a “non mi ricordo” even after so long a residence—in Italy’ (*CMP*, p. 120).
(5) *CPW* V, 296.
(7) *PBSL* II, 137, 230–1, 1137–8.
(8) *PBSL* II, 137.
Doubtful law

(11) *PBSL* II, 328.


(16) Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron Noted During a Residence with his Lordship at Pisa, in the Years 1821 and 1822* (London: Henry Colburn, 1824), p. 293.

(17) *BLJ* VI, 83.


(19) For discussion of the authorship of the review, see *Quarterly Review Archive*, ed. Jonathan Cutmore: (http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/qr/index/36.html) and Reiman’s headnote to the review.


(22) *CPW* Joukovsky (ed.), *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock*, II, 131, 145.


(25) *BLJ* VI, 68, 72.

(27) Jeffrey’s review of *The Excursion* criticizes Wordsworth’s ‘long habits of seclusion’ and belief in his own ‘system’, recommending that the inward transport of poets ‘should be tempered by an occasional reference to what will be thought of them by those ultimate dispensers of glory’ (*Edinburgh Review*, November 1814, pp. 3–4).

(28) Coleridge’s metaphysical writing in *Biographia* was condemned as unsuccessful flight or ‘playing at hawk’ by Jeffrey and Hazlitt (*Edinburgh Review*, August 1817, p. 491), and as obscuring the topics he set out to elucidate by John Wilson: ‘he darkens what was dark before into tenfold obscurity … till we no longer know the faces of our old acquaintances beneath their cowl and hood’ (*Blackwood’s*, October 1817, p. 5). In ‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’ ll. 207–8, Shelley portrays Coleridge as ‘A cloud-encircled meteor of the air,/A hooded eagle among blinking owls’.

(29) On 14 March 1817, the MP for Norwich, William Smith, quoted Southey’s *Quarterly Review* article against political incendiaries and called him a ‘renegado’. Reviewing Southey’s long pamphlet response to Smith, the *Edinburgh Review* posed the question: ‘What would the worthy Laureate be at?’ (March 1817, p. 166).


(33) *CPW* V, 672.


(36) *CPW* V, 672.

Doubtful law

(38) For Thomas Warton’s contrast between Milton and Dante, see Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision*, p.13. For discussion of Coleridge’s comparisons of Milton and Dante as political writers, see Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, pp. 70–7. Coleridge appears to be drawing on Hazlitt’s lectures.


(43) *BLJ* VI, 46.

(44) Landor, *Works*, I, 47.


(46) *BLJ* VI, 31, 47.


(51) Thomas De Quincey, ‘Notes on Walter Savage Landor’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* 14.158 (February 1847): 96–104

Hewitt, Symbolic Interactions, p. 153. Becker traces Landor’s political purpose through his prefaces and letters about Imaginary Conversations, and isolates the following aims: that ‘above two hundred men and women will live again’; that ‘all important questions should be fairly and fully discussed’; ‘to remove and consume the gallows on which men are liable to suffer’; and to ‘[sprinkle] as much antiseptic as possible against popery (which Landor defines elsewhere as a form of subjugation). See George J. Becker, ‘Landor’s Political Purpose’, Studies in Philology 35.3 (July 1938): 446–55.

Hewitt, Symbolic Interactions, p. 155.


Quoted in Elwin, Landor: A Replevin, p. 383.


Colvin, Landor, p. 197.


Doubtful law


\(^{70}\) Landor, *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree*, p. 515.

\(^{71}\) Landor, *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree*, p. 490.

\(^{72}\) Landor, *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree*, p. 510.

\(^{73}\) Landor, *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree*, p. 514.

\(^{74}\) Landor, *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree*, p. 520.


\(^{77}\) Hawlin and Burnett (eds), *The Ring and the Book*.


\(^{80}\) Wheeler (ed.), *Unpublished Writings*, p. 38.


\(^{82}\) Wheeler (ed.), *Unpublished Writings*, p. 40.


\(^{84}\) Wheeler (ed.), *Unpublished Writings*, pp. 33, 35.

\(^{85}\) Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows*, II, 705.

\(^{86}\) Hawlin and Burnett (eds), *The Ring and the Book*, XII, 874.


\(^{88}\) *BC XIV*, 265.


*PBSMW*, p. 691.


Landor complained about the staircase in his lodgings in Florence, which he declared ‘inferior to a mason’s ladder’. See Elwin, _Landor: A Replevin_, p. 443.

*BC* XII, 119.

*BC* XII, 119.

*BC* XVIII, 133–4.

*BC* XVIII, 131.

*BC* XVII, 114.

*BC* XVII, 114, 126.

*BC* XVII, 126.

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