



LORD BYRON'S *CAIN: A MYSTERY* – BOOK REVIEW
LORD BYRON'UN CAIN: BİR GİZEM'İ - KİTAP
İNCELEMESİ

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It is impossible to disagree with Peter L. Thorslev's statement *Our Last Great Age of Heroes* unfolding as “[o]ut of ordinary twentieth-century working concept of the Romantic Movement is by no means strictly historical, but is based on a value judgement” (14), which is represented by the Byronic Hero named after Lord Byron's scandalous reputation and so-called immoral personality imbued with “all passion and fiery energy, all moral, intellectual, and political rebellion” (16). A Byronic Hero in an anti-hero posture is thus more than a vehicle of mere literary representation and carries a Romantic mission to rebel conventional set of moral standards.

Lord Byron's play *Cain: A Mystery*, which claims to give a voice to the unheard, focuses on the subversion of the biblical investiture in the story of Abel Cain with an emphasis on Cain. As it turns out, the play transcends this generic focus of the biblical narrative and worthily rebels with its centralization of the unorthodox values of biblical imperatives. As in the Byronic hero's thematic response, the play proves this statement to be true, and uses representation as a centipede force to connect every subversion of values, one of which is indeed subtle yet overlappingly significant: The inappropriate sexuality that resides particularly in homosexuality and incest, while religion establishes the dogmas. Although these aspects are anchored not in the plot but in the implicit collective consciousness of biblical identity-in-difference methodology such as God/Satan or, more precisely, correct/incorrect, the overall framework of the play conforms to this assertion, as will be explained. Therefore, this book review serves as a building block² for future studies of Romanticism in the exploration of the Byronic hero and Byron's *Cain*, arguing that Byron's

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² Although the need for a book review relates primarily to contemporary databases, Byron's play was not examined in the (homo)erotic sense that this article seeks to pursue. Therefore, this new idea should exceptionally be presented in this original way as a book review.

transgressive imagination in the play speaks volumes about what lies beyond the sight, i.e., how otherness is formed exiled by the Law through the sexual connotations.

The play consists of three acts, covering a broad subject but a focused exploration of the post-Lapsarian world of God's laws, conventions and traditions. The first act parallels the biblical inscriptions of the fall of Adam and Eve in their efforts to redeem themselves through sacrifice, which Cain rejects. The second act follows a detour from Byron's imagination and shows Cain travelling into the abyss with Lucifer to lure Cain. In the third act, the play reaches its apotheosis and forms the basis of the essay's argument: Cain's expel on the principle of identity-in-difference. As for the sexual connotations in Cain's actions, this essay does not focus on the general framework of the play, but on the relationship Cain has with both Eve and Abel under the banner of love in the Bible.

In the biblical context, love is such a vast subject that it cannot be covered in the entire essay; Therefore, the concept of love is limited to the framework of Jesus' famous statement about love: "*This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you*" (John 15:12). Love, in this way, is something to be implemented within the decrees of Jesus as an extension of God's will. Nevertheless, for someone who, like Cain, chooses to go astray, happens to be what Jesus/God does not wish to exhibit as the other demeanour in love, for, as Stuart Hall reminds us, the pro forma de rigour goes hand in hand in an ideological construction with what it excludes in the process of religious inclusion (*Who Needs Identity?* 17). To reinforce this inclusion/exclusion dialectic, which is also clearly observed in the psychoanalytic approach of Melanie Klein's projective identification, what is buried in silences and gaps is what the dominant ideology wants to control but cannot completely erase. For this very reason, Jesus' explanation not only introduces the reverse path in love, explaining the silence on this (homo-)eroticism in the Bible, which is referred to as something that religion excludes and thus controls but also insinuates that the right path of love is a construct that could be torn down or transgressed.

In this context, illegitimate love is interpreted in two ways chosen in the context of Byron's play: (a) homoeroticism and (b) incest. As far as homoeroticism is concerned, the first thing that comes to the fore in the play is the relationship between Cain and Abel. What brings about the realization is that Cain kills Abel. With a destructive injury reminiscent of Moby Dick's injury to Ahab's leg,³ interpreted in canon as homosexual copulation, not to mention Ahab's lineage rooted

³ It is a reference to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1951), in which Ahab relentlessly pursues Moby Dick, the whale, as a vengeance after the whale has mutilated Ahab's leg.

in a biblical body as the seventh king of Israel, the struggle between Cain and Abel shows a similar line of destruction from Cain to Abel's *head* and *reason* upon which religion draws arguments. If Cain is a Byronic hero as he really is, then it is only natural to derive a full conception of the destructive force of heretic homosexuality on *logos* embedded in monolithic religion, culture and custom to name a few. The choice of this interpretation is based on *queer*⁴ Cain's portrayal of disharmony and even otherness. In a cultural metanarrative, Cain's projection at this point might be viewed as an indictment of the correct and logical Abel as a semblance of religion.

The other hold is the concept of incest. The other hold is the concept of incest. Indeed, contrary to homoerotic scarcity, the Bible and Byron's play have significant space for this idea. In the play, during the journey into the abyss with Cain, Lucifer occasionally brings up the subject of incest and prophesies that one day incest will be forbidden. The Bible, in this way, reads: "*You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness*" (Leviticus 18:7). In the biblical realm, God apparently forbids incest, just as Lucifer prophesied. Immediately after this prophecy, Cain's deed to Abel becomes known to the other members of the familial community, and they show consensus about Cain's exile. If Cain's exile consists in his otherness through the killing of Abel, which in this context is taken as a homoerotic semblance, then so does his transgressive relationship with his mother, which adds another layer to him and thus makes him a (m)other prototype. This homosexual and incestuous threat embedded in Cain's personal structure is what religion seizes upon to distance him from the community. Eve thus as a mouthpiece articulates:

Hear, Jehovah!

May the eternal Serpent's curse be on him [Cain]!

For he was fitter for his seed than ours.

May all his days be desolate! (Cain, Act III)

In this way, an ideologically and spiritually mutilated religion portends a bright future for a homogeneous ideology, demarcated not only from religious heretics but also from other forms of others, namely homosexuality and incest.

⁴ The use of this word is meant to encompass Cain's transgressive embodiment and implied homoeroticism. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the word, queer, means not only "*strange or unusual*" but also a way of "*describing a homosexual*" (1219). Hence, queer theory.

Thus, the religious denial opens up more subtle connotations here. Cain proposes the diapason of the other in homoerotic and incestuous allusions. The play's ending paralleling Cain's seclusion makes more sense in this connection. The Bible clearly states that incest and homoeroticism are forbidden. Cain's exile, then, means nothing other than wiping out the possibilities of otherness, incest and homosexuality, and thus establishing the first religious dogmas, as claimed in this article. I urge the reader and scholar to read the text from this perspective, from silences and gaps, and from what is left unhinged and under pressure.

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