

LITERATUROZNAWSTWO

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The literary portrayals of Ivan Mazepa in Byron's *Mazeppa* and Pushkin's *Poltava*. A comparative analysis

Литературное изображение Ивана Мазепы в поэме
Байрона *Мазена* и в поэме Пушкина *Полтава*.
Сравнительный анализ

Abstract. This article provides a comparative analysis of Ivan Mazepa – the protagonist in the poems *Mazeppa* (1819) by George Gordon Byron and *Poltava* (1829) by Alexander Pushkin. It gives a brief outline of who Mazepa was to identify the reasons for this historical figure to have attracted the considerable attention of the Great Romantics. Deploying the theoretical method on recognition and the juxtaposition of differences of literary works within Reception theory developed by Mary N. Layoun, the article examines aspects of dissimilarity in the literary portrayals of the image of Mazepa in Byron's and Pushkin's poems. The juxtaposition of *Mazeppa* and *Poltava* explains ways in which details from Mazepa's biography and exploits that inspired Byron's creative imagination and kindled his desire to recount the story of Mazepa can be contrasted with Pushkin's presentation of the same protagonist as generated by his own viewpoints on the political aspects surrounding the events of the Great Northern War, specifically the Battle of Poltava. The article applies Hans Robert Jauss's concept of the horizon of expectations to examine the case of Pushkin's reception of Byron. It argues that what underlies the nature of Pushkin's disagreement with Byron is his emotional involvement with the subject matter.

Keywords: Ivan Mazepa, Byron, Pushkin, heroic character, villain, historical authenticity, the Battle of Poltava, Charles XII, Peter I

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In the 19th century, the Mazepa theme acquired a legendary aura within European Romanticism and became a paradigm of the heroic character – “a universal symbol of a suffering hero” (Pelenski 516) – for many authors in literature, music

and art. The figure of Mazepa was the subject matter of George Gordon Byron's eponymous poem (1819), Alexander Pushkin's poem *Poltava* (1829), Victor Hugo's poem *Mazeppa*, included in his *Les Orientales* (1829), Juliusz Slowacki's drama *Mazepa* (1840), Franz Liszt's symphonic poem *Mazeppa* (1857), and Peter Tchaikovsky's opera *Mazepa* (1884) (Pelenski 508). It is worth mentioning who Mazepa was and why he attracted so much attention, especially as many readers believe that he was a figment of the Romantic literary imagination.



Monument to the Hetman, Ivan Mazepa,
in Cathedral Square, Poltava, Ukraine¹.

Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709), whose surname in works by Western authors is spelled “Mazeppa”, was indeed a real historical figure. The descendant of prominent Ukrainian noble families, he received a thorough education. He graduated from the

¹ The photo comes from: *The Battle of Poltava*, created by Oleg Bezverkhniy, web-design by Larisa Tuzova, <http://www.battle.poltava.ua/english/monmazepa.htm>.

Kyiv-Mohyla College in Ukraine, studied at the Warsaw Jesuit College in Poland, and obtained a position of page at the court of the Polish King Jan Kazimierz, by whom Mazepa's abilities were well recognized. He was sent by the King to further his education in Western Europe, and from 1656 to 1659, he studied mathematics, artillery skills and new manufacturing methods in Germany, Italy, France and Holland (Smyrniw 1). Mazepa learned Latin, mastered several European languages – German, French and Italian – and became well acquainted with Western culture (Smyrniw 1). Due to his impressive education and diplomatic expertise, Mazepa accomplished a distinguished career: after his service at the Polish royal court, he embarked upon the service of the Leader, or Hetman, of the Right-bank of Ukraine as a Commander of the Hetman's Guard, and further advanced to the position of General Chancellor (Smyrniw 2). Mazepa was “an outstanding statesman, politician, diplomat, military leader [...] and a fervent patron of the arts” (Pelenski 509).

The story of Mazepa's famous horseback ride, supposedly invented by his contemporary Jan Chryzostom Pasek, gained him fame (Pelenski 509). It is accepted that Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII, Roi de Suède* (1731) became of pivotal importance, as it “contributed most to putting Mazeppa's story before the Western public” (Babinski, quoted in Smyrniw 6). Despite a small discrepancy, that is, his confusion of the fact that Mazepa was Ukrainian and not Polish, Voltaire proved to be well acquainted with the history and geography of the Eastern lands. In his book, he mentioned places and names that had until then been unknown to the general Western public, and described the battle between Peter I and Charles XII near Poltava in Ukraine. His account of Mazepa's story also incorporated some captivating elements revealing of the Hetman's noteworthy political activity and his personal character. Voltaire offered his portrayal of Mazepa's fascination with the wife of a Polish nobleman who, in his desire to avenge the affair, had Mazepa “tied, stark naked, to a wild horse, and set him free in that state” (Voltaire 157). This scene aroused tremendous attention and captured the imagination of many authors, leading to the creation of numerous artefacts in literature, music and the visual arts. Interestingly, Voltaire's favourable attitude to Mazepa is made clear from the description of Mazepa's survival and the beginning of his career as Hetman:

The horse, which had been brought from Ukrania, returned to its own country, carrying Mazeppa with him half dead from hunger and fatigue. Some of the peasants gave him relief, and he stayed a long time among them, and distinguished himself in several attempts against the Tartars. The superiority of his intelligence made him a person of consideration in the eyes of the Cossacks, and as his reputation daily increased, the Czar was forced to make him Prince of Ukrania (Voltaire 157).

From this paragraph, it is evident that the French writer and philosopher sees Mazepa as a hero, which is further validated in the text when Voltaire refers to

him as “a man of great courage” (Voltaire 158). Voltaire’s story was not devoid of political importance – it tackled the historical fact that the Ukrainian politician planned the alliance with Charles XII to gain independence for Ukraine from Russia, which made him a traitor in the eyes of the Russian Tsar (Voltaire 157), and an enemy of the Russian Empire.

A juxtaposition of Byron’s *Mazeppa* and Pushkin’s *Poltava* is a particularly interesting case of comparison, as the poets’ portrayals of the same subject matter are in stark contrast to one another. The fact that Pushkin’s poem is a clear response to Byron’s work, makes it even more compelling. Byron openly indicates that his poem is indebted to Voltaire’s work. In the “Advertisement” to *Mazeppa*, he confirms that *Histoire de Charles XII* was his source of information about the protagonist, cites the passages and gives the page numbers from the book. It should be observed that while Byron familiarized himself with Voltaire’s text through the medium of French, Pushkin, too, was acquainted with Byron’s works through their French versions (Cardwell 336; Nabokov 118). This detail shows the significance of French artists and their language in shaping a connection between history, cultures and literatures in European Romanticism during that period. Strikingly, Pushkin’s portrayal of Mazepa is very different from the West European Romantic attitude of the time. Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva points out that the attitude to Mazepa depends on two existing clichés: the Russian one and the Western European one (*Lûdi ne oçen’ hotât znat’ svoû nastoâsuû istoriû*, electronic source). Affirming that Pushkin wrote *Poltava* in response to Byron’s poem, the historian explains that in Russia, Mazepa has been perceived negatively precisely due to his adverse depiction by Pushkin: “...в России про Мазепу чаще всего знают из Пушкина, поэтому очень сложно изменить вот этот миф и отношение к мифологическому Мазепе и объяснить, что это был совершенно другой человек” (*Lûdi ne oçen’ hotât znat’ svoû nastoâsuû istoriû*, electronic source). Tairova-Yakovleva believes that the lack of research focused specifically on Mazepa is the main reason for the persistence of the stereotypical depiction of Mazepa as a traitor in Russian historiography (Siundiukov 2008). Robert Holub’s indication that the development of the study of literature can be characterized by “qualitative jumps, discontinuities, and original points of departure” (Holub 14) suggests that Pushkin’s presentation of the Mazepa theme can be seen as a starting point for a discussion with Byron. The poem *Mazeppa* indeed seems to have furnished Pushkin with an opportunity to challenge the Great Romantic.

In order to establish the reasons that triggered Pushkin’s divergence from Byron’s heroic treatment of the Hetman, Mary Layoun’s method of a comparative analysis of literary works premised on recognition and juxtaposition of differences proves productive (Layoun 584). Layoun draws attention to the literal meaning of the classical Greek concept of comparison as “*synkrisis* – from συγκρίνω: to distinguish or dis-

cern [κρίνω/*krino*] – *with* or *among* [σύν/*syn*] – what is brought together” (Layoun 584). Importantly, the recognition of the poems’ differences is prompted by Pushkin himself. From the first lines of *Poltava*, he openly invites the comparison with Byron by selecting the lines from *Mazeppa* as the epigraph for his poem:

The power and glory of the war,
faithless as their vain votaries, men,
had pass’d to the triumphant Czar (Pushkin 195).

The words “triumphant Czar” – Byron’s only reference to the Russian Tsar in *Mazeppa* – immediately introduce a contrast to Byron’s poem, clearly defining that the hero in *Poltava* is Peter I, whose heroic portrayal is further built up throughout all three cantos. The epigraph is hence effective in directing the reader’s attention to the author’s concerns in the poem. Even the description of the time of the battle is telling in *Poltava*: “This was when the young Russian nation was flexing its muscles in trials of strength as it matured under the genius of Tsar Peter” (Pushkin 199). The glorification of the nation and the Tsar is immediately followed by the poet’s assessment of the Swedish King’s military activity as “skating dangerously over an abyss” (Pushkin 199), and of his victories as being “profitless” (Pushkin 199). This is remarkably divergent from Byron’s portrayal of the Swedish army:

TWAS after dread Pultowa’s day,
When fortune left the royal Swede,
Around a slaughter’d army lay,
No more to combat and to bleed (Lord Byron 5, ll. 1–4).

Byron furthermore devotes fourteen lines to the description of the Battle of Poltava, and forty-four to the portrayal of Charles XII’s wounds and suffering, which signals the poet’s concern for the characters’ emotional state rather than the poem’s political discourse. On reading the Byronic lines, the reader will perceive the Swedish monarch and the Ukrainian Hetman as heroes, and, therefore, will offer them compassion, just as Byron does himself.

The antithetical presentation of Peter I and Charles XII in *Poltava* deepens as the story unfolds, with its culmination in canto III, where Pushkin’s attitude to the Russian Tsar is clear-cut: “Peter dashed along in front of his regiments, strong and exultant, like a champion. He devoured the battlefield with his eyes” (Pushkin 222). Concurrently, the position on the Swedish monarch is explicitly unfavourable:

Charles too appeared in front of the dark blue ranks of his own battle troops, borne by trusty servants on a stretcher, pale and motionless, in pain from his war-wound [...] Charles seemed disconcerted by the battle he had long desired (Pushkin 222).

Such contrasting portrayals of the monarchs and their armies reinforce an understanding of Pushkin's desire to counter Byron. *Poltava* then can be seen as an instrument for the poet's manifestation of his divergent political views. The juxtaposition of the beginnings of the poems allows discerning the authors' positions: while Pushkin undoubtedly sides with Peter I, Byron's sympathetic portrayal of the Swedish Army and the King's defeat allies the poet with Charles XII. Notable here is Timothy Brennan's remark that comparative literature has been "always a response to war" (Brennan, quoted in Layoun 588), which enhances the comparability of Pushkin's argument with Byron that is structured around a warlike context.

A contradiction to Byron's poem is also tangible from the title of *Poltava*, which is the name of the city where the battle between the Swedish and Russian armies took place. The choice of the title suggests from the outset the author's intention to tackle the events from a broader perspective. Indeed, while Byron devotes most space in his poem to the depiction of the protagonist's courage and survival in exile, Pushkin focuses rather on the historico-political matters. Their importance to Pushkin is revealed in his mentioning of specific details that surround the story, his reference to numerous political figures, such as Kochubey, Doroshenko, Samoylovich, Paley, Gordeyenko, Khmelnytsky, Orlik, Bulavin, and even to the Crimean khan and the Turkish sultan, and to various historical places, for instance, Belaya Tserkov, Dikanka, the Rivers Dnieper and Don, and others. Pushkin highlights the historicity of *Poltava*: "Mazeppa acts in my poem exactly as in history..." (Pushkin, quoted in Pauls 53). These words challenge Byron's literary, romanticized presentation of Mazepa, yet they also promise historical accuracy. The reader, who is assured of the historical authenticity of Byron's protagonist in the "Advertisement", will be undoubtedly surprised by such a contrast in Pushkin's treatment of the same protagonist. "In *Poltava*, one did not know what to make of the character of Mazepa", admits Paul Debreczeny in his study on the relationship between Pushkin and his critics (Debreczeny 398). The distinct differences communicated in the beginnings of the poems consequently bring us to Pushkin's major contradiction to Byron at the heart of *Poltava* – his presentation of Mazepa as a villain as opposed to Byron's heroic depiction of the Ukrainian Hetman.

Byron creates gradually a valorous aura around Mazepa. Initially, the reader perceives the positive qualities of Mazepa's character through the depiction of the Hetman's attitude to his horse – he takes care of it before he rests after the battle:

But first, outspent with this long course,
The Cossack Prince rubb'd down his horse,
And made for him a leafy bed,

And smooth'd his fetlocks and his mane,
 And slack'd his girth, and stripped his rein,
 And joy'd to see how well he fed... (Lord Byron 8, ll. 57–62)

Emphasizing Mazepa's kindness, goodness and care for his battlefield ally, these lines carry a clear message that such a character cannot be a villain. Further development of parallels between the horse and its master strengthens the reader's perception of the protagonist's virtuousness:

But he was hardy as his lord,
 And little cared for bed and board;
 But spirited and docile too;
 Whate'er was to be done, would do (Lord Byron 8, ll. 66–69).

As can be seen from the register, Byron ensures the construction of a fully positive image of his protagonist. This is bolstered by another example of the Hetman's worthiness as he shares his food with "the monarch and his men" (Lord Byron 9, l. 89), and this scene wins Charles XII's appraisal of his decency. The King's reference to Mazepa's horse as Bucephalus (Lord Byron 10, l. 104) equates the Hetman with Alexander the Great, once again highlighting his merit. Byron's gradual technique of shaping a hero is convincing also because the cogency of the Hetman's goodness is strengthened by the fact that Byron's portrayal of Mazepa echoes the character's heroic presentation in numerous works by many other authors.

Pushkin's response to Byron's hero is highly emotional, as if caused by his outrage at the favourable description of Mazepa. The first canto of *Poltava* displays an exceptional compression of the poet's belligerent attitude to the Hetman, presenting him as a "brazen rapist" (Pushkin 201), a "wrecker of lives", a "decrepit bird of prey" (Pushkin 202), "obdurate" (Pushkin 205), a "seducer" (Pushkin 206), "grim-faced" (Pushkin 217), and a "scoundrel" (Pushkin 224). Pushkin points to "the fearful abyss of his restless and insatiable personality" (Pushkin 202), and states that the Hetman's "friendliness was false" (Pushkin 201), decidedly reiterating on several occasions that he was a villain. Throughout *Poltava*, the reader is unlikely to encounter any positive information regarding Mazepa, as the poem is blackened with the examples of his ruthlessness and deceitfulness. The poets' incorporation of a love affair shows how the same detail can be interpreted in different ways and utilized to create disparate images producing opposite effects. While Byron narrates Mazepa's love intrigue with a married countess as a sublime combination of passion and adventure, with Mazepa being elevated to a romantic hero, Pushkin uses a love story as the main element to accentuate the dark sides of Mazepa's character, portraying him as a dishonourable villain. Pushkin structures

his poem around the Hetman's love affair with his friend Kochubey's daughter, Maria, forty-five years younger than Mazepa, to whom he was also the godfather. In *Poltava* Maria runs away with Mazepa and becomes his mistress. The choice of the love intrigue from the outset provides a feeling of negativity:

Hetman Mazepa was old. He was weighted down with years, with wars, with worries and with duties. But his appetites still simmered within him, and once again he felt the urge for love (Pushkin 197).

It is important to mention that the meticulous care with which Pushkin studied historical documents while working on *Poltava* is highlighted by a number of researchers. Roger Clarke, for instance, points out that Pushkin thoroughly examined contemporary historical sources and was "mostly accurate" (Clarke 276) in his depiction of the political and military events in Ukraine in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Hence, it is unlikely that the poet was not familiar with the true course of the development of the relationship between Mazepa and Maria, whose name was Motrya in real life. A curious reader, however, will find significant discrepancies in Pushkin's interpretation of the historical facts concerning the Mazepa love story.

Investigating the Hetman's romantic relationship with Motrya in his study on Ivan Mazepa's life, Walter Smyrniw confirms that after his wife's death, Mazepa wished to marry his oldest friend's daughter Motrya (Smyrniw 3). The scholar notes that Mazepa's proposal was declined by the girl's parents due to the age difference and to the fact that Mazepa was Motrya's godfather, explaining that such marriages were prohibited by the Orthodox Church (Smyrniw 3). Smyrniw asserts that having strong feelings towards Mazepa, Motrya indeed escaped from her parents' house to the Hetman's palace, yet Mazepa immediately sent her back home, and even asked the Tsar's representatives to assist him in the matter "to quiet the suspicion" (Smyrniw 3). Another source provides the name of the Tsar's representative that participated in the action – Colonel Anenkov (Pauls 55). Moreover, mentioning the correspondence between Mazepa and Motrya that attests to their romantic feelings, Smyrniw presents one of the twelve extant letters showing that Mazepa "came to his senses" (Smyrniw 4) and realized that their relationship was doomed due to her parents' opposition and to "the blows of the Church and its curses" (Smyrniw 4). Smyrniw's research is supported by references to various historical sources by Russian, Polish and Ukrainian authors. His findings parallel the results from John Pauls's investigation of the Mazepa-Motrya relationship, in which the latter opines that Pushkin's fictionalized version of the love episode is used by the poet "in order to obtain the most dramatic effects" (Pauls 55). Hence, Pushkin's presentation of Mazepa's love episode in *Poltava* clearly impugns

the poem's historical verisimilitude. The question then arises whether Pushkin's rhetoric of condemnation of Mazepa's feelings to a much younger girl is not too harsh:

There was not a single affront, from the day he was born, that he forgot; no place was out of reach of his wicked design; he recognized nothing as sacred; he remembered no kindness; there was nothing that he loved; blood he would spill like water; freedom he despised; for his homeland he cared not at all (Pushkin 201).

Such a description of Mazepa's "true nature" along with the fact that most of the space in the poem is devoted to his political activity directed at the liberation of Ukraine from Russian rule, allows an assumption that the Mazepa-Motrya love episode is merely a point of departure for Pushkin's portrayal of the Hetman as a villain, while the body of the poet's indignation is aimed at Mazepa's treachery of the Russian Tsar. Pauls rightly notes that the "abusive epithets" Pushkin had for Mazepa evince that the poet "gave free reign to his patriotic bias and imperialistic emotions" (Pauls 55), which, in turn, reveals the poet's emotional engagement with the subject matter. This view is firmly shown in the final lines of *Poltava* that close the circle of Pushkin's villainous depiction of his protagonist, reaffirming that it constituted the base for the manifestation of the poet's biased political views. In *Poltava*, "the foolhardy warrior" (Pushkin 227) Charles XII is defeated and forgotten: "The only record of the Swedish king's visit there are three stone steps sunk deep in the earth and overgrown with moss – all that remains of the ruined house where he took shelter" (Pushkin 227). The glory unsurprisingly belongs to Peter I: "Tsar Peter, hero of Poltava, is the only one to have raised up a great monument to himself in establishing the civil and military structure of his northern Empire" (Pushkin 227). The quote clearly conveys Pushkin's engagement with political matters and reveals his admiration for the Tsar. Mazepa's death at the end of *Poltava* propounds the idea that any disloyalty to the empire will be quelled. The Hetman is not only physically destroyed, though; Pushkin makes sure that even the memory of the treacherous Hetman is to be erased:

A despairing traveller would search there in vain for the hetman's tomb: Mazepa has long ago been forgotten, except that once a year to this day the Church, in holiness triumphant, menaces him thunderously with her solemn curse (Pushkin 227).

The final lines of *Poltava* logically complete the protagonist's malicious depiction. Mazepa's death and defamation reinforce a link between the political discourse and Pushkin's personal attitude to the Tsar and the Russian empire. Pauls reminds us that while Pushkin called for "glorified freedom" and "mercy for the fallen" (Pushkin, quoted in Pauls 77) in his poem titled *Monument* (1836), he no-

netheless ruthlessly condemned Mazepa's "struggle for an independent Ukraine" in *Poltava* (Pushkin, quoted in Pauls 77). Hence, the tension between Pushkin's own patriotism and his firm condemnation of Mazepa's devotion to his country allows to conclude that *Poltava* is coloured by Pushkin's personal emotions reflecting his imperialistic position. Pushkin's creative response to Byron, therefore, was driven by his disagreement with Byron's treatment of the subject matter in *Mazeppa*. Pushkin's poem became an instrument for the Russian poet to extol the Tsar and the empire.

The denouement in *Poltava*, in which the paean of praise to the empire is sung and justice to the enemy is served, is in stark contrast to the final lines of *Mazeppa*. Byron grants his protagonist life and ends the poem with Mazepa's rest after the Battle of Poltava:

The Hetman threw
 His length beneath the oak-tree shade,
 With leafy couch already made,
 A bed nor comfortless nor new
 To him, who took his rest whene'er... (Lord Byron 46, ll. 860–865)

This place of tranquility after the battle provides the illusion of a possible continuance and prompts the author's wish for the legendary Hetman to survive. The open-ended form of the epilogue possibly invites the reader to think of more of the protagonist's adventures. The fact that the Swedish monarch is alive and peacefully asleep beside Mazepa might even encourage the belief that the liberation movement started by Mazepa will be continued. Having portrayed Mazepa's past, Byron offers the reader to envision his future, anticipating that such virtues as valour, honesty, loyalty and striving for liberty will be celebrated.

The juxtaposition of the poems' differences, again, makes it quite clear that in his desire to challenge Byron, Pushkin is driven by his emotional engagement with the subject matter. Layoun's indication that comparison is "resolutely situated" on political, historical or social grounds (Layoun 585) prompts that answers to Pushkin's antagonistic response to Byron's romanticised hero should be sought, firstly, in a shift in Pushkin's reception of Byron, and, secondly, within Pushkin's contemporary context.

Considering a theoretical perspective on Pushkin's deliberate imitation of Byron, it has been suggested that the Russian poet preoccupied himself with Byronism in order to gain popularity. Monika Greenleaf maintains that during his 1820 exile, Pushkin realized that Byronism was the most advantageous option for the creation of his own image as a romantic poet. Greenleaf explains that he skilfully manipulated Byron's model, designed for a broad public, and appropriated it for the tastes of his Russian, class-stratified, audience (Greenleaf

383). Pushkin's fruitful utilization of the Byronic model, modified within his own, Russian literary and social context, enabled him to forge his poetic identity, which instantly brought him immense popularity in Russia. Greenleaf's argument is notably supported by her reference to Pushkin's formulation of his "brief fling" with Byronism in the late 1820s (Greenleaf 383), and his later judgement of Byron's works created in exile as "the youthfully flawed products of his apprenticeship to Byron" (Greenleaf 384). Pushkin's eager acceptance of the Byronic model, which lasted during four years of his southern exile, subsided as he turned to writing drama in 1824, and eventually resulted in his "famous demotion"² of Byron (O'Neil 590). The change from Pushkin's admiration for Byron's works to their direct criticism is often explained by Pushkin's wider readership of the classics in the mid-1820s and their increasing influence on his writings³. Pushkin's shift in attention is not novel, and his faculty of utilizing other poets' ideas has been emphasized by many researchers, who highlight that at different stages of his literary career Pushkin became inspired by different authors, whose concepts he widely exploited in his works⁴.

The severance with Byronism brings to mind Hans Robert Jauss's hypothesis of a horizon of expectations that is "broken or disappointed by literary works" (Holub 87), which can be extended by Wolfgang Iser's observation that literature "takes its selected objects out of their pragmatic contexts and so shatters their original frame of reference" (Iser, quoted in Holub 87). It is likely that Byron's *Mazeppa* was viewed by Pushkin against his changed reality, in which the elements of his horizon of expectations: "desires, demands and aspirations" (Holub 68), were affected by changes within the socio-political context of the Russian literary life in the 1830s.

Firstly, the government's increasing influence on publication and criticism of literary works that signalled the end of the epoch of liberal optimism in Russia im-

² Pushkin's disparagement of Byron's dramatic works appeared in his unpublished note *On Byron's Dramas* (1827) and the unfinished reviews *On Olin's tragedy "The Corsair"* and *Table-Talk* (1830s).

³ Simmons confirms that Pushkin's criticism of Byron attests to "the eye-broadening scope of his readings in foreign literature" (see Simmons, quoted by O'Neil 590–591).

⁴ Having examined a large body of Pushkin's poetry and prose in her *With Shakespeare's Eyes, Pushkin's Creative Appropriation of Shakespeare* Catherine O'Neil indicates that Pushkin was a "notoriously «protean» writer" (p. 19). O'Neil establishes Shakespeare's direct influence on Pushkin in the 1830s, and points to numerous cases of resemblance to Shakespearean concepts in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1825), *Count Nulin* (1825), *The Moor of Peter the Great* (1827–1828), *Poltava* (1828–1829), *Rusalka* (1832–1834), and *The Captain's Daughter* (1836). Importantly, all these works were written by Pushkin after his 1820–1824 exile, which confirms that the poet entered a new period in his literary development. The vantage point from which Pushkin received and perceived Byron is clearly altered.

pelled Pushkin to project a new poetic persona. Some of Pushkin's works were not well accepted by critics, and his literary failures, for instance, the suppression of his *Boris Godunov* that was written in 1825, published in 1831 and censored until 1866, probably fuelled his wish to change his relationship with critics in order to improve their views on his works. Secondly, Greenleaf believes that Pushkin's need for the change of his poetic position after his exile was generated by changes in his readership, as his literary options of a poet writing for a broad public in 1820–1824 differed from his later readership, which Greenleaf characterizes as “aristocratic coterie” (Greenleaf 383). As a result, the poet's political engagement, his attitude towards authority and his revolutionary spirit after his exile underwent significant changes. Pushkin's attitude to the Russian Tsar Nicholas I can be gleaned from the report, compiled by Director of the Tsar's secret police von Fock:

The Poet Pushkin is getting along extremely well politically. He sincerely loves the Czar and even says that he owes his life to him, for he was so bored with his life in exile and the constant chains that he wanted to die (Lednicki 390).

Von Fock provides Pushkin's own words illustrating his fidelity to the Tsar: “I should have the name or patronymic Nicholas, for without him I would not be alive. He gave me life and, which is much greater, freedom: Vivat!” (Lednicki 390). These lines reveal the poet's striking change from an ardent fighter for freedom to the Tsar's humble servant. Importantly, von Fock's report convincingly demonstrates that the change was emotional. Perhaps the poet was mired down in the weariness of his exile, and therefore, his ennui hastened his submission to the authorities.

Pushkin's favourable stance on authorities may also be reflective of his much-improved financial state due to his marriage to Nathalie Goncharova, one of the Tsar's favourites, in 1831. Persuaded by Goncharova's family into seeking financial security, the poet requested for support from the government, and received an estate and some grants (Du Bois 266). In this way, Pushkin's dependence upon the government was fashioned and his loyalty to the Tsar secured.

Although Pushkin's biographers maintain that he never entirely abandoned his liberal ideals of the 1820s and was “continually on the edge of exile because of his liberalism” (Du Bois 266), towards the middle of the nineteenth century Pushkin's literary expression clearly took a different direction. In the 1830s, his writings broke loose from Romanticism and “from the spell of Byron” (Cardwell 337) and became conditioned by the Russian historical and social context. This is reflected, for example, in *To the Slanderers of Russia* (*Клеветникам России*, 1831), *The Bronze Horseman* (*Медный всадник*, 1833) and other works, in which Pushkin praises the Russian empire.

The socio-political changes that led to Pushkin's distancing himself from Byronism modified the poet's horizon of expectations, and thus altered his processing of Byron's text. Eva Kushner's observation that both auctorial impact and social relatedness give text its original meaning (Kushner 121), brings forward an understanding that Pushkin's reception of Byron in the mid-1820s became devoid of both: his poetic creativity was no longer influenced by Byronism, which also lost its social relatedness for Pushkin. Therefore, although Byron's *Mazeppa* became for the Russian poet "«the familiar territory», on which text and reader meet to initiate communication" (Iser, quoted in Holub 86), the territory, which Pushkin felt he knew better, the heroic portrayal of Mazepa that had already been in the canon of Romanticism, did not receive the same response from Pushkin. Instead, the poet dealt with this case of literary canon in his own manner: it was reassessed by him, appropriated for his contemporary socio-political context, and reshaped Mazepa into a villain figure in line with his imperialist beliefs. This calls to mind Iser's explanation of the reader's discovering for himself "the code underlying the text" (Iser, quoted in Holub 86). Processing Byron's *Mazeppa*, Pushkin discovers the code that is clearly in dissonance with Byron's interpretation, and hence the meaning of Byron's text is called into question. It is useful to think here of Iser's indication that "literature «tells us something about reality» by ordering its conventions so that they become objects of our reflection" (Iser, quoted in Holub 86), as it seems apt to both poets' interpretations of the image of Mazepa. The protagonist's literary destiny in *Mazeppa* and *Poltava* – whether he is a hero or a villain – was predicated upon Byron's and Pushkin's respective realities, and on many factors that formed them: the poets' socio-political conditions, their personal circumstances and viewpoints.

To date, the story of Mazepa offers the reader the space to pass independent judgement and to decide whether the Ukrainian Hetman was a hero or a villain, particularly in light of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. It is certain that the reader's outlook on the Mazepa theme will not just involve a process of mere evaluation of the historical facts, but will largely depend on their emotions as well.

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