

# The Political Dimension of Byron's "An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill"

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"Intellectuals and romantics like the poets Blake, Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth picked up that anti-technology theme, but identified with its other side. In the 'dark Satanic mills' of industry, they saw the human spirit being stifled...."

-William Safire (1998)

"The day will come when Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron. England too, will, I hope, one day remember the mission, which Byron fulfilled on the Continent.... From him dates the sympathy of all the true – hearted amongst us for this land of liberty, whose true vocation he so worthily represented among the oppressed."

-Giuseppe Mazzini (1839)

## ABSTRACT

Byron's major poems, such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan*, and others, are unmistakably flavored with political satire. It is therefore puzzling that a number of literary critics, with the exception of Malcolm Kelsall, Michael Foot, and Tom Mole, have avoided commenting in any significant manner on the political dimension of Byron's "An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill," a poem which is emphatically responsible for identifying him as a vibrant, political poet. In his ode, Byron demonstrates his capacity to fuse his political notions with a poetic sensitivity extending beyond rhyming verses. In this respect, the purpose of this paper is to position Byron's ode in its appropriate historical and literary frame, to examine its political affiliations, and to highlight the role Byron plays in displaying a synthesis between politics and poetics, a role cautiously avoided by other Romantic poets. Malcolm Kelsall claims in *Byron's Politics* that Byron's poetry had essentially made no substantial political impact (50). Similarly, Michael Foot in *The Politics of Paradise* contends that Byron's political fervor "existed independently of his poetry" (Qtd. in Coe para. 9). I differ with both and tend to agree with Tom Mole's assessment that Byron's "An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill" is principally responsible for exhibiting him as a poet of an unmistakable political disposition.

**Keywords:** Lord Byron; "An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill;" historical, political, and literary dimension; politics and poetics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to provide the historical background that preceded Byron's poem in order to comprehend its literary frame and political reverberations. During the early eighteenth

century, and as an outcome of the Napoleonic wars, industrial workers experienced a reduction in salaries and were unable to cope with the existent economic conditions. At the time, laborers resorted to renting their textile machinery at an exceedingly high cost. This reflected negatively on the quality of products that started to deteriorate. In 1812, crisis after crises befell the manufacturing industry. Second-rate textiles were created and unprofessional laborers flooded the market. Consequently, the industry market underwent a decline that lasted from 1780 until 1830, and laborers suffered from impoverishment (Mole 118). With the advent of the industrial revolution, wage earners, particularly textile weavers, marshaled their clout and created a movement against capitalism, technology, and progress. The demonstrations led by these oppressed weavers shook the tranquility of England and threatened its national peace for five years.

Who were these undaunted rebellious workers that threatened the English government? The Luddites — textile weavers from Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Nottinghamshire — organized strikes to protest the introduction of machinery; as their employers embraced the new technology, their insecurity made them threaten to destroy these novel contraptions.

This rebellion that had started as an insignificant movement alarmed British entrepreneurs and authorities; it led to British ministers taking cruel measures in their attempt to quench the Luddites' upheaval. The government issued a law that breaking frames was a misdemeanor resulting in the death penalty.

The bill passed on February 20, 1812. The frame breakers were at first exiled as a punishment for their vandalism. Subsequently, the government increased the severity of their offense with the prospect of execution. Ministers claimed that frame abusers threatened the country's security; workers, thus intimidated, were kept from executing their alleged illegal activities (Mole 112-113). Interestingly enough, the Luddites' rebellion was rewarded for it precipitated other social improvements such as child labor decrees, trade syndicates, and free schooling (Irvine 3). It is worth mentioning that the year 2012 marked the occasion of the Luddites' 200th anniversary in Yorkshire; the movement's crucial political role is still celebrated and remembered.

As a result of the introduction of the Bill, Lord Byron targeted his February 27, 1812 speech at supporting the textile weavers. He delivered this speech, his first one, while ministers debated the proposed legislation (Dowden 22). Byron opposed the governmental action and endeavored to amend the bill; he considered it merciless and unreasonable. He proved in this respect to be a confirmed patriot.

## 2. LITERARY FRAME

The exact time when the poem was composed is unknown. Byron had apparently written it without informing his friends. He told the editor: "I wish you could insert it tomorrow for a particular reason" (Qtd. in Mole 119-120). An appreciation of the poem's historical context facilitates the comprehension of its literary frame. On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1812 the "Ode" appeared in *The Morning Chronicle*. It followed Byron's first political speech. Therefore, the poem's publication was Byron's second accomplishment supporting the same cause. In 1816, Byron executed a third feat in support of the workers — he composed "Song for the Luddites," in which he begs for liberty to be granted to the oppressed workers and once more presses for a revolt against tyranny.

Whether in his first political speech or the "Ode" or the "Song" that followed, Byron has one major target. He opposes in these three works government decrees in order to support public

gain — which is freedom. It is despotic lawmaking that motivates him to create his ode. This is the similar impulse that marks his first speech in which he declares, “My own motive for opposing [the] bill is founded on its palpable injustice, and its certain inefficacy” (Qtd. in Marchand 57). His poem is a protest against what is unjust, an objection to unfair laws. The poem helps initiate his personal campaign against tyranny and oppression. A profound patriotism and desire to emancipate the poor from the chains of a repressive and autocratic government — and Byron’s immeasurable love for liberty — are the main reason for his attacking parliamentary abuses aimed at laborers.

The theme that attracts a reader’s attention in the “Ode” is that of technology. According to Steven Jones, “Romantic literature was somehow inherently incompatible with technological media” (3). Moreover, William Safire, a modern 1990 Luddite author states, “the fundamental literary-historical assumption is that the Romantics were ‘natural Luddites.’ Romanticism, full of mindfulness nostalgia and the transcendence of ‘the human spirit’ ” opposed technological development (Qtd. in Jones 1-2). The Romantics regard new technology as unfriendly. An aversion to technology exists among other eighteenth-century writers and is perceived, for instance in Mary Shelley’s well-known 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*. It is the monster in the novel that articulates the author’s view about the hazards of technology. The monster itself asserts to Dr. Victor Frankenstein, “Slave... Remember that I have power... You are my creator, but I am your monster; obey” (Shelley 212).

Consequently, what inspires Byron to write the “Ode” is the intrusion of machines that usurped and undermined the laborers’ role in the field of industry. Byron, in fact, flagrantly opposes technology, Capitalism, consumerism and globalization; he is more concerned with the oppressed weavers, wishing to defend them from the menacing industrial revolution.

The motif of the “Ode” is the extent industrial expansion is in conflict with its opponents. According to Mole, “Byron should perhaps have been embarrassed by industrialization ... by annotating its abuses” (112). Reading between the lines, a reader observes that Byron’s underlying message in the poem is that industrialization is not a hindrance “but the uses to which it is put. As such, the poem provides an example of how industrialization can be turned to humane ends” (Mole 128). In Byron’s opinion, technology should serve the people and improve their lives. The poem is not about whether Byron supports technology or not; he had after all approved of the progress achieved by the printing press, the medium that promulgated his poems. However, I agree with Mole in this respect; Byron ironically “embarrasses industrial publishing” because he deploys it to criticize industrialization at large (129). However, although Byron’s “Ode” satirizes technical developments, he is in reality only against machines that required human labor. As mentioned above, industrial innovations have made his poem effectual, “reaching a large and informed audience before the end of the Lords’ debate” (Mole 128). Consequently, Byron employs technology as a means to fight its abuses.

Byron employs the medium of satire to criticize technology; he reveals his message under its cover. It is the means by which he exhibits the notion of rejection or rebellion. In *Don Juan*, Byron admits: “... but I was born for opposition” [Xv, xxii]. I tend to disagree with Imke Heuer who states in “Byron and the Politics of Continental Europe” that the satirical frame of Byron’s oeuvre remains unnoticed (para. 7). Byron uses irony to expose the socio-political corruption, desiring to replace it with an ethical frame that suits the oppressed weavers. The poem’s objective is to express discontent at the technological advancement in weaving manufacture; it sharply criticizes an industry that abuses its own workers. These two lines of verse are the best testimony: “So if we can hang them for breaking a bobbin, ’T will save all the Government’s money and meat:” (ll.11-12).

In “An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill,” Byron mockingly praises the efforts of Lord Liverpool — who proclaimed the Bill — and other parliamentarians such as Lord Richard Ryder and Lord Eldon Chancellor for adopting a resolution that halted the rebellious frame breakers:

Oh well done Lord E[ldo]n! and better Lord R[yde]r!  
 Britannia must prosper with councils like yours;  
 HAWKESBURY, HARROWBY, help you to guide her,  
 Whose remedy only must *kill* ere it cures.” (ll. 1-4)

Here, Byron accuses politicians of abusing wretched laborers, provoking them to riot throughout the country. He makes a similar point in his first speech: “The effect of [the] present bill would be to drive [the oppressed] into actual rebellion” (Qtd. in Marchand 57). Instead of offering a solution to comfort the oppressed, government officials passed a bill that entailed capital punishment for frame breakers:

Those villains, the Weavers, are all grown refractory,  
 Asking some succour for Charity’s sake —  
 So hang them in clusters round each Manufactory,  
 That will at once put an end to *mistake*. (ll. 5-8)

Byron confronts the government sardonically, claiming that people sacrifice their lives in order to enrich monopolists:

The rascals, perhaps, may betake them to robbing,  
 The dogs to be sure have got nothing to eat —  
 So it we can hang them for breaking a bobbin,  
 ‘T will save all the Government’s money and meat: (ll. 9-12)

Byron’s biting tone implies that the economic and social status of the laborers is significantly more important than enriching capitalists. The following four lines of verse echo Byron’s contemptuous, satirical tone employed to attack obliquely politics/politicians, commerce and technology:

Men are more easily made than machinery —  
 Stockings fetch better prices than lives —  
 Gibbets on Sherwood will *heighten* the scenery,  
 Showing how Commerce, *how* Liberty thrives! (ll. 13-16).

Byron mocks officials that fear the rate at which the impoverished reproduce; consequently, the government should also be dismayed with manual workers that seemingly reproduce unrestrainedly.

Byron is critical of the government’s reaction; it displays the extent to which ministers are indifferent towards their people. He considers workers much more precious than industrial progress per se; economies should not develop on the basis of peoples’ lives or loss of freedom. Through juxtaposing both nouns “Commerce” and “Liberty” in line 16, Byron insinuates that the poem’s fictional spokesman believes that the two words are identical. Moreover, by capitalizing both nouns, Byron personifies them and magnifies the dissension between market forces and freedom, and as Mole proposes: “The free market makes the free man” (120).

In fact, is it not the “free market” that emancipates man? The problem is that the ministers did not act appropriately, and the general public had no objection to an oppressive government. Byron writes in the last stanza:

Some folks for certain have thought it was shocking,  
When Famine appeals, and when Poverty groans,  
That life should be valued at less than a stocking,  
And breaking of frames lead to breaking of bones.  
If it should prove so, I trust, by this token,  
(And who will refuse to partake in the hope?)  
That the frames of the fools may be first to be *broken*,  
Who, when asked for a *remedy*, sent down a *rope*. (ll. 25-32)

Byron echoes the same concept in his first political speech: “We must not allow mankind to be sacrificed to improvements in Mechanism” (Qtd. in Marchand 57). According to Byron, violence breeds further violence; if those who break frames are unfairly penalized, the legislators who issued the unjust decree should also be punished.

According to Mole, Byron uses “frames” in line 28 as a pun signifying both textile progress and human figure: “And breaking of frames leads to breaking of bones.” This implies a direct warning against workers and also indicates that lawful officials are hypocritical in their attempt to contain cruelty and resort to another form of it. To Byron, any country that plots against its citizens: “Grenadiers, Volunteers, Bow- street Police,/ Twenty-two Regiments, a score of Jack Ketches”(ll.18-19) and any government that mobilizes its soldiers to fight its own people displays a fear of them and is cold-hearted and unsympathetic. Byron vows that the despotic government and its ministers would be penalized one day: “...I trust, by this token, / (And who will refuse to partake in the hope?)” (ll. 29-30). He is seemingly convinced that those who employ brutal means are eventually affected by them too. This eventually materialized since this poem led to retribution aimed at those who framed the Bill. This also occurs in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* where the monster becomes the master of its creator. By the same token, the Frame Bill whose purpose was to subdue the people empowered them to overcome the government — the incensed mob now took charge.

### 3. SYNTHESIS BETWEEN THE POLITICAL AND POETICAL DIMENSION

Although critics have determined that the “Ode” has minor literary significance, historically, it is of major political importance. As a matter of fact, the “Ode” makes Byron renowned not as a major poet but as an outstanding political activist. According to Mole, this poem is Byron’s promotion to celebrity (14).

It is crucial to note the assistance provided to Byron that enabled him to transmit his poem to an attentive, livid audience. At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, technological advancement was introduced in the field of industry. One significant innovation was an apparatus capable of producing paper rapidly and cheaply on a massive scale. By choosing this channel for publishing his poems, Byron reached a wide audience of different classes. The rebellions that followed the poem’s second publication are proof that it circulated swiftly in the laborers’ milieu (Mole115-116 125). Thus, the second publication of the poem was seized by its appropriate political audience. Byron succeeded in projecting his liberal views from a relatively diminutive audience to a larger one due to the combined efforts of the poet, audience and the press.

Byron's political notions and concerns affect the overall poem's subject matter. His political implication is a double edged sword: he exhibits his sarcasm against legislators; however, he is simultaneously concerned with a national issue and with the people's welfare. Byron, through the "Ode," seeks reform through parliamentary amendments. His poem has social and political implications whose principal objective is a restructuring of society. Byron employs the "Ode" as a catalyst to politically inspire his audience by exposing the stark truth behind the mask of a cruel British environment. He deploys his art to launch a rebellion against a traditional government of which he is a member. As a national iconoclast, he chooses to be disloyal to parliamentary officials; he is thus in conflict with the politically predominant issue of his country. His primary allegiance is towards the factory employees. He admits to Lord Holland that he is "half a frame breaker [himself]" (Qtd. in Marchand 58). Thus, the schema of the poem is a patriotic concept that he, as a Whig, demonstrates his concern to a national issue — the poem is a reaction to a national problem that perturbed the lower and middle classes in 1812. Discussing national politics, Byron proves to be revolutionary.

The poem's political message is not separate from the world; it is embraced in it. Byron "wanted the poem's stinging satire to be ringing in their Lordships' ears as they debated" (Mole 120). It is noteworthy that the cause he fought for in the "Ode" did not dissipate ineffectually — eventually "... the policy of tolerance which he advocated was adopted by the House" (Dowden 25).

Through the "Ode," Byron unifies his political thoughts with his poetic art. In fact, his published poem serves both as "a poetic event and a political intervention" (Mole 115). In *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley discusses the ethical role of a poet who leads and supports the common people. By doing so, the poet links politics and poetics through his imagination, interpreting it through the usage of appropriate language and concepts in his poems (Schoina 70).

This is what Byron accomplishes in his "Ode." He discovers a compromise "between his life and his art" (Cochran 3) and employs his poem to reflect and spread his radical views to his people. He demonstrates an utter dedication to the latter, being an active poet involved in humanitarian concerns. He champions the oppressed in the poem, exposes their anguish, and encourages them to rebel against an overwhelming government. He communicates through a political avenue his concern about the social, economic and political crisis in England.

Moreover, Byron applies what Shelley outlines in his book *The Philosophical View of Reform* — the poet's function is to adopt a lucid role in becoming politically dedicated "... to a social cause in order to achieve specific effects, for instance, urge people to react against any form of tyranny" (Schoina 71). By adopting this political and social mission, poets become, as Shelley describes them, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Qtd. in Schoina 71). Byron plays an active political role, by publishing this poem; as the people's representative, he illustrates in poetic terms to the government the misery of the oppressed workers, decreeing what is best for them. He advises the government through his bitter criticism to abandon the unwarranted decree; otherwise, famine, poverty and riots would engulf England, and this is precisely what occurred. Having revealed the tyranny of the government, Byron incites the mob to take action and seek revenge. He does not comment on the conflict from an outsider's point of view, as a member of the House of Lords, he is blatantly involved in the struggle. Hence, he transports the poem — a work of art — to a concrete social setting. As a poet and a politician, Byron knows what his people deserve; he is actively engaged in England's political affairs.

In *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth affirms that a poet "... is the rock of defense of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love.... the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of

human society” (Qtd. in Schoina 70). Thus, to Romantic poets, a poet has the noble political objective of assisting society. This is what Byron does. He places his political “Ode” in the service of humanity; he is not in an ivory tower isolated or detached from his people. On the contrary, he exhibits fervor and genuineness towards domestic and socio-political concerns and is guided by philanthropic motives to enlighten his followers.

In the “Ode,” Byron estimates that the government’s function is to serve its people and not vice versa. He confirms his liberal ideals and dedicates his life and art – his poems – to fight the overbearing forces that hinder liberty. Similar to other Romantic poets, he attempts to engross his poetry with the spirit of the age by relating poetical compositions to “both the ideal (the poetic) and the actual (the political)” (Schoina 69). Since literature is a mirror of its age, it reflects the struggles society experiences. Byron reflects in the “Ode” the political, social and economic turmoil that England was witnessing — a creative and convincing synthesis of art and reality.

Few critics have written extensively about Byron’s political thinking in his poetry. When poets compose poems, they tend — since they transcend what is real into an unreal reality — to alter certain views and situate them in an ostensible political frame. However, this does not apply to Byron. According to Coe, poetry to Byron “was a whole habit of thinking” (para. 8). This pragmatic perspective that relates poetry to real life is what makes a difference in enlightening and educating the public – this is the paramount mission of a poet. Byron never leaves a gap between the fictional and the factual; the world of politics is stretched to that of literature. An ideal setting has been designed for his countrymen, providing them with a national identity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To genuinely appreciate Byron, it is necessary to focus on his political ideas; reading him solely for his literary merit is not sufficient. His career as a politician was relatively short and not impressively productive, and his political role faded or played itself out swiftly.

Byron’s political ideology and dogmas have a broadened horizon in his poems. The “Ode” provides readers with a clear-sighted view concerning his glaring political thoughts. As a Romantic poet known for championing liberty and progressive thought, Byron reveals a link between the “Ode” and nationalism. His poem advocates frequently the supreme importance of liberal principles, nationalism and self-expression. He maintains a sharp eye on domestic political issues that concerned his country, revealing his aversion towards tyranny and cruelty.

As an enlightened and free-thinking politician and poet, he is significantly involved in England’s political issues and plays an effective political role in order to rescue the oppressed weavers. Byron, the poet of the impoverished, becomes a national leader of the working-class who mobilizes his verse to defend the anguish and torment of the laborers. His “Ode” was highly received by his target audience and provided him with a heroic, national identity.

Thanks to the “Ode,” Byron is seemingly an advanced, modern poet, advocating liberty against despotism and enslavement. He desires that his people experience an emancipated existence in an egalitarian society. From a historical perspective, are not his concerns identical to our current ones? Are not his motives similar to those of suffering, deprived people attempting to loosen or remove the shackles of authoritarianism in various parts of the world?

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