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## **Poltava at 300: Re-reading Byron's *Mazeppa* and Pushkin's *Poltava* in the Post-Soviet Era**

It is a rare pleasure for literary scholars to find allusions to the works we are studying in the headlines of major newspapers. Yet in 2009, Pushkin's narrative poem *Poltava* (1829) received much attention in the Russian and Ukrainian press, owing to the controversy surrounding the Ukrainian tercentenary commemoration of the 1709 Battle of Poltava.<sup>1</sup> Pushkin's poem emphasizes the treachery of Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709), the Ukrainian Hetman who defected from Russia to Sweden during the Great Northern War (1700–21) and who subsequently faced defeat at Poltava.<sup>2</sup> The poem's vilification of Mazepa has provided material for many Russian journalists to co-opt Pushkin as an ally against the rehabilitation of Ivan Mazepa in post-Soviet Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> Iurii Luzhkov, then mayor of Moscow, even followed in Pushkin's footsteps by penning his own verses on Poltava, while in Ukraine, Pushkin's *Poltava* has been referenced in Ukrainian parliamentary debates.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The edition of *Poltava*, and all other Pushkin *poemy*, is as follows: *Sobranie sochinenii A. S. Pushkina*, ed. D. D. Blagoi and others, 10 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959–1962), III (1960), 192–235. All citations from *Poltava* are referenced in-text with page numbers referring to this edition of *Poltava*.

<sup>2</sup> A note on spelling: 'Mazeppa' is a historical spelling that Byron uses in his poem and which is still used in reprints and discussions of Byron's work. 'Mazepa' is the spelling used both by Pushkin and in contemporary English to discuss the historical figure. In this paper, to be consistent with current trends, I will use 'Mazeppa' to describe the hero of Byron's work, 'Mazepa' for Pushkin's hero, and 'Ivan Mazepa' for the historical figure.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the following articles: Valentin Koval'skii, 'I gde zh Mazepa? Gde zlodei?', *Krasnaia zvezda: gazeta tsentral'nogo organa Ministerstva oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 27 December 2008, <http://www.presssito.ru/POLITIKA/3444/> [accessed 8 December 2010]; Aleksei Kovalev, 'Iushchenko izdevaetsia nad istoriei s ogliadkoi na SShA', *Pravda*, 8 April 2008, <http://pravda.ru/world/former-ussr/ukraine/262149-3/> [accessed 8 December 2010]; Svetlana Andreevna, 'Istoriu nado izuchat', a ne perepisyvat', *Golos Rossii*, 3 April 2009, <http://rus.ruvr.ru/2009/04/03/946525.html> [accessed 8 December 2010]; Aleksandr Mashchenko, 'Kuda bezhal Iuda v strakhe?' *Krymskoe vremia*, 3 March 2009, <http://mir-1.smartymedia.biz/content/kuda-bezhal-iuda-v-strakhe> [accessed 8 December 2010].

<sup>4</sup> Luzhkov publicly read excerpts from his poem at a re-enactment of the Battle of Poltava in July 2009. This reading received widespread coverage in Russian and Ukrainian media, see for example Irina Koval'chuk, 'Luzhkov napisal poemu «Poltava»', *Segodnia*, 10 July 2009, <http://www.segodnya.ua/news/14064392.html> [accessed 22 January 2011]. On the debate in the Ukrainian parliament, see Mikhail Riabov, 'Blok Iulii Timoshenko protiv prazdnovaniia 300-letia Poltavskoi bitvy', *Novyi*

Obviously, the recent controversy provides one more example of how the post-Soviet republics have developed new, national interpretations of history which challenge previously accepted Russian and Soviet norms.<sup>5</sup> More interestingly, it provides a case-study for how contemporary Russians read canonical writers and rely on the authority of literary texts even when dealing with historical topics. The Russians have accused the Ukrainians of historical revisionism and have offered Pushkin's *Poltava* – a literary source – as an authentic depiction of Ivan Mazepa to challenge the allegedly idealized image of the Hetman that now prevails in contemporary Ukraine. Curiously, this situation echoes the cultural and ideological milieu in which Pushkin himself was writing: he saw his poem as an antidote to the romanticized view of the Hetman offered in Byron's *Mazeppa* (1819) and Kondratii Ryleev's poem *Voinarovskii* (1824).<sup>6</sup> In this article, I return to Pushkin's *Poltava* with the current controversy in mind. I demonstrate that Pushkin deliberately fashions a sense of historical authenticity in this poem, and that he achieves this aim through deliberate parody of the tropes of Byron's *Mazeppa*. It is this claim to historical veracity – rather than a genuine confrontation of the historical issues at stake – that attracts nationalists in contemporary Russia to this poem.

To a certain extent, the current controversy over the legacy of the Battle of Poltava replays a common debate in postcolonial societies: how should a colonized people respond to traditional commemorations of colonial victories? For example, in Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics continue to clash during the marching season, when Protestants celebrate the campaign of King William III and his victory at the Battle of the Boyne.<sup>7</sup> In Australia, the History

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*Region – Kiev*, 22 August 2007, <http://www.nr2.ru/kiev/136088.html/print/> [accessed 8 December 2010]. Riabov reports that in August 2007, the Ukrainian politician Iuliia Tymoshenko attacked then-Prime Minister Viktor Ianukovich for presenting 'an even more odious portrait of Mazepa than Pushkin's *Poltava*'.

<sup>5</sup> The issue of creating a national history has been most contentious in bicultural states with large Russian minorities, such as Latvia, Estonia, and Kazakhstan. For an overview of the issues from a social science perspective, see Pål Kolstø, *Political Construction Sites: Nation-building in Russia and the Post-Soviet States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> The edition of Byron's *Mazeppa* used here is *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–1993), IV (1986), 173–200. All subsequent references to Byron's *Mazeppa* are in-text citation by line number. *Voinarovskii* is reprinted in Kondratii Ryleev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1861).

<sup>7</sup> On Northern Ireland parades, see Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), especially Chapter 3 on the mythologization of King William III and the Battle of the Boyne.

Wars have sparked debate on the correct way to commemorate Australia Day, including recent attempts to re-appropriate the Imperial holiday as a day of Aboriginal mourning.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ukrainians have utilized the theory and rhetoric of colonialism to explain their own history: an official school textbook alludes to the 'anti-colonial campaign' of Ivan Mazepa, and he enjoys the status of a proto-nationalist hero in the country.<sup>9</sup> For their part, Russian textbooks continue to portray the Battle of Poltava as a moment of Imperial triumph, a turning-point in the Great Northern War, where victory ultimately guaranteed Russian supremacy in the Baltic region.<sup>10</sup> Russians have maintained a persistently negative view of Ivan Mazepa: the nineteenth-century historian Nikolai Kostomarov's biography of the Hetman painted him as a selfish opportunist and specifically denied that he represented a national idea.<sup>11</sup> Although a recent biography by Tatiana Tairova-Iakovleva offers a more balanced treatment of the Hetman,<sup>12</sup> a sense of contemporary popular Russian attitudes towards Mazepa may be gleaned from the fact that Kostomarov's scathing biography has won a new popularity in today's Russia: since 2000 it has been re-issued not only in hardcover, but also in audio book and downloadable digital audio book.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On the Australian History Wars, see Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 2004), especially Chapter 6 on the controversial 1985 bicentennial commemoration of Cook's landing in Botany Bay.

<sup>9</sup> The standard-issue history textbook for pupils aged between thirteen and fourteen includes references to on Mazepa's anti-colonial revolt against Muscovy: V. S. Vlasov, *Istoriia Ukrainy: 8 klass* (Kiev: ASK, 2002). In a speech in November 2008, Iushchenko advised Ukrainians to take Mazepa as an example of faithful service to the country: Viktor Iushchenko, 'Vitannia Prezidenta Ukraini organizatoram, uchasnikam i gostiam Mizhnarodnoi naukovo-teoretichnoi konferentsii "Doba get'mana I. Mazepi v evropeiskii istorii: mifi i realii"', Press Service of the President of Ukraine Viktor Iushchenko, 7 November 2008, <http://pda.president.gov.ua/news/11944.shtml> [accessed 10 June 2010]. In general, Mazepa's prominence in Ukrainian national iconography is reflected in various forms of public recognition: streets and parks have been re-named in his honor; a monument erected in his honor in Kiev and another is planned for Poltava. The current ten hryvnia banknote carries his image and a special Mazepa postage stamp was issued in 1995. A recent Ukrainian film, *Molitva za Get'mana Mazepu*, dir. by Iurii Il'enko (Dovzhenko Film Studios, 2002), depicts the Hetman as a hero, fighting against a depraved Tsar Peter I.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksandra Ishimova, *Bol'shaia illiustrirovannia entsiklopediia istorii Rossii dlia detei* (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2006), 253–4.

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Kostomarov, *Mazepa: istoricheskaia monografiia* (Moscow: I. N. Kusereneva & Co., 1882), 441–446.

<sup>12</sup> Tatiana Tairova-Iakovleva, *Mazepa* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Reissued in hardcover as Nikolai Kostomarov, *Mazepa* (Moscow: Terra-knizhnyi klub, 2004); in audiobook (Studio ARDIS, 2005); in downloadable digital audiobook (Studio ARDIS, 2008).

However, one important element differentiates the Russian/Ukrainian controversy over Poltava from other postcolonial examples: the emphasis that Russians place on imaginative literature, especially poetry, in debates regarding history. For example, a reviewer for the national daily *Izvestiia*, when reviewing a Battle of Poltava exhibition, not only praised the exhibition for its factual portrayal of Mazepa as a traitor, but also reminded readers that Pushkin's *Poltava* also offered a completely historically-accurate account of the events leading up to the battle:

Кстати, в поэме Пушкина “Полтава”, несмотря на романтическую канву, вся политическая подоплека тех событий изложена вполне достоверно – не зря автор снабдил произведение множеством ссылок и комментариев.<sup>14</sup>

While all societies have used literature to explore national identity issues, particularly the legacy of colonialism, it is difficult to imagine any literary work – much less a narrative poem – in, say, Ireland or Australia, attracting the widespread public attention that *Poltava* has in Russia.

It is harder still to imagine a prominent elected leader from these countries writing a poem to express political judgement, and publicly performing it with all the panache that Mayor Iurii Luzhkov exhibited in his reading of his Poltava poem at a re-enactment of the battle:

Сегодня новые Мазепы стремятся правду исказить,  
Меж Украиной и Россией вражду разжечь и распалить.  
Тот, кто Мазепу ныне славит, рискует лишь позор стяжать.  
Одумайся, Мазепа новый, перекрестись на купола!  
Не начинай творить ты снова былые черные дела!<sup>15</sup>

In these lines, Luzhkov imitates the Romantic rhetoric of prophecy, imagining a fatalistic connection between the eighteenth-century events ('bylie chernye dela') with the present day ('Mazepa novyi'). Nevertheless, the immediate political function of the poem is clear: it is a threat ('Odumaisia') urging the Ukrainian nationalists ('tot, kto Mazepu nyne slavit') not to defy Russia.

<sup>14</sup> Dmitrii Smolev, 'Iubilei istoricheskogo sobytiia, imevshego epokhal'nye posledstviia dlia Rossii', *Izvestiia*, 15 March 2009, <http://www.izvestia.ru/culture/article3126289/> [accessed 8 December 2010].

<sup>15</sup> Fragment of Luzhkhov's poem as cited in Koval'chuk, 'Luzhkov napisal poemu «Poltava»'.

Poetry in Russia, then, retains an elevated status in the Russian imagination: both as a medium for providing a record of historical accuracy (in the case of Pushkin) and even as a valid form of political discourse and prophecy (in Luzkhov's reworking of Puskhin). This respect for poetry accords with Andrew Wachtel's claim that Russians are often more comfortable with literary writers writing their history than historians.<sup>16</sup> According to Wachtel's theory of 'inter-generic dialogue', Pushkin's work combined literary and historical methods to produce an intriguing mixture of historical commentary: one should read his history *Istoriia Pugacheva* (1833) alongside his novel *Kapitanskaia dochka* (1836) to understand the Pugachev revolt more fully. Although Pushkin wrote no objective history of Ivan Mazepa's role to accompany the poem *Poltava*, a modified version of Wachtel's intergeneric dialogue may still apply there, if we consider that Pushkin saw *Poltava* as the historical account which responds to the heavily-romanticized treatments of the Hetman which his contemporaries Byron and Ryleev had offered. In his foreword to the first version of *Poltava*, Pushkin writes 'Nekotorye pisateli khoteli sdelat' iz nego geroia svobody, novogo Bogdana Khmel'nitskogo'; moreover, he pledges that his poem will present a historically-accurate, undistorted portrait of him: 'luchshe bylo by razvit' i ob"iasnit' nastoiashchii kharakter miatezhnogo getmana ne iskazhaia svoevol'no istoricheskogo litsa'.<sup>17</sup>

Pushkin scholars in Russia have often reiterated the writer's claim that *Poltava* was a historically accurate retort to Byron's romanticized treatment. In his monograph *Bairon i Pushkin*, Viktor Zhirmunskii argues that *Poltava* is the work that marks Pushkin's decisive break with Byronism, and that Pushkin's Mazepa is a psychological study and considered ethical critique of the Byronic hero.<sup>18</sup> However, a more interesting response to Pushkin's *Poltava* is provided by Aleksei Parshchikov's poema 'Ia zhil na pole poltavskoi bitvy' (1989), a complex work which deftly jumps between the imaginary Pushkinian world of the battle and

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Wachtel, *Russian Writers Confront the Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Puskhin, *Sob. soch.*, III, 450.

<sup>18</sup> V. M. Zhirmunskii, *Bairon i Pushkin* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1928 [reprinted 1978]), 201–216. The notes to the Soviet 1960 edition of Pushkin's *Sobranie sochineniia* (ed. D. D. Blagoi) echo Zhirmunskii's claim, and suggests that *Poltava* shows Russia as a successful multinational state, uniting the various peoples of its domain but excluding the 'kovarnyi vlastoliubets' Ivan Mazepa: see Pushkin, *Sob. soch.*, III, 491.

everyday life in late twentieth-century Poltava, revealing how literary history – more than historical fact – shape the contemporary consciousness.<sup>19</sup> Western scholarship remains divided on Pushkin's *Poltava*: John Pauls and Svetlana Evdokimova have critiqued the poem as Pushkin's apology for Russian imperialism, and A. D. P. Briggs has concentrated on the artistic weaknesses in its construction.<sup>20</sup> However, several Western critics have defended *Poltava*. Virginia Burns praises the work for its psychologically-convincing characters and its tight poetic structure.<sup>21</sup> John Bayley comments that Pushkin's Mazepa has 'something of the depth of a Shakespearean portrait' and compares him to the villain Iago.<sup>22</sup> David Bethea's essay 'Pushkin: from Byron to Shakespeare' names *Poltava* as a late work belonging to his mature 'Shakespearean' period.<sup>23</sup>

If we follow David Bethea in seeing Pushkin's career as a trajectory from Byron to Shakespeare, then we might expect the Shakespearean elements in the transitional poem *Poltava* to fail because of excessive reliance on the Byronic model. However, it is my contention that Pushkin's *Poltava* fails to attain Shakespearean complexity not because of excessive Byronism, but because the poem's primary function is to parody Byron. Pushkin's poem is a 'double-voiced parody' in the sense that Gary Saul Morson, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, defined that term: parody is a 'special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience)

<sup>19</sup> Aleksei Parshchikov's poem appears as part of his collection *Figury intuitsii* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989). As Alexandra Smith argues, 'Parshchikov presents the Poltava battle in a true post-modernist vein: neither as an event that can be remembered as a historical fact, nor as an event that can be forgotten'. See her *Montaging Pushkin: Pushkin and Visions of Modernity in Russian Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 320.

<sup>20</sup> John Pauls, *Pushkin's 'Poltava'* (New York: Shevchenko Scientific Society, 1962). Pauls ominously suggests 'Pushkin conquered not only historical structural shortcomings, but even truth itself' (30). Svetlana Evdokimova, *Pushkin's Historical Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999). Evdokimova develops this idea, suggesting Pushkin attempts to mythologize the Great Northern War as a Holy War between Orthodox Russia and incarnate evil. A. D. P. Briggs, *Alexander Pushkin: A Critical Study* (London: Duckworth, 1982). Briggs calls *Poltava* a 'disappointing reversion to the crudities of characterization, motivation and construction of the Southern poems' (109).

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Burns, *Pushkin's Poltava: a literary structuralist interpretation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> John Bayley, *Pushkin: A Comparative Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 120–1.

<sup>23</sup> David Bethea, 'Pushkin and Shakespeare' in *The Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. Neil Cornwell (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 22.

can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluation'.<sup>24</sup>

*Poltava* acts precisely as such a palimpsest: the text repeatedly echoes and engages with Byron's *Mazeppa*, so that any reader familiar with Byron's poem will re-evaluate that text. Specifically, *Poltava* makes the reader question the ethics of *Mazeppa*, its limited historical and geographical scope, its romantic fictionality, and its implied historical philosophy. However, Pushkin's commitment to parody ultimately reduces the complexity and resonance of *Poltava*, particularly for readers unfamiliar with Byron. While *Poltava* has moments which suggest the possibility of psychological complexity, Pushkin ultimately reverts to stock characters and a folkloric plot overlaid with Christian mythology and an eschatological sense of history. It is precisely these elements which attract contemporary Russian nationalists, rather than the historical veracity that they claim to find there.

Pushkin immediately demonstrates his intention to engage with Byron by taking his epigraph from Byron's *Mazeppa*. The lines that he chooses are significant:

The Power and Glory of the war,  
Faithless as their vain votaries, Men,  
Had passed to the triumphant Czar. (Pushkin 192; Byron, ll. 5–8)

In Byron's poem, these lines act as a framing device, placing the context of Mazeppa's story in *longue durée* history. However, Byron's poem never describes Peter's victory nor 'the Power and Glory of the war' in detail, but rather concentrates on a single mythologized incident from Mazeppa's youth: his 'wild ride', when he was tied to a horse as a punishment for his liaison with a nobleman's wife. By choosing this epigraph, Pushkin forces the reader to re-evaluate Byron's poem. He implies that Byron omits – or mentions only in passing – the truly important historical events of Mazeppa's career, and further suggests that his own poem will supply a corrective to Byron, giving adequate treatment to the events that Byron glosses over.

Indeed, from the outset, Pushkin is careful to map his poem onto actual geographical space and historical time. Byron begins his poem by referring to the grand sweep of history: his opening stanza depicts Mazeppa after the Battle of

<sup>24</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's 'Diary of a Writer' and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin, TX: Texas University Press), 108.

Poltava, which is seen as a rehearsal for Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia. However, Pushkin opens with a more localized space and an immediate reference to a historical personage of Mazepa's period: Vasilii Kochubei, the Ukrainian nobleman whom Ivan Mazepa would betray. He immediately names both Kochubei and Poltava to show that his poem will deal with a different stage of the Hetman's life than Byron's. Pushkin even inserts his own footnote at the end of the very first line of the poem, which informs the reader of Kochubei's name and patronymic and states that he is the ancestor of the current Count Kochubei. As early as the fourth line, he provides a second footnote, a definition of 'khutor'. The implications are clear: firstly, the reader should believe that the characters and places in Pushkin's poem are genuinely historical; secondly, the reader should not pay heed to other poems which describe imaginary episodes in Mazepa's life. Indeed, the footnotes continue to impress contemporary readers, for example, the *Izvestiia* reviewer who stated that they were evidence of historical veracity.<sup>25</sup>

However, even in this opening stanza, there is an odd contrast between the footnoted historical specifics and the folkloric tone of the verse. The portrayal of a father whose only joy and pride is his beautiful daughter suggests the beginning of a familiar folkloric plot: the abduction of a maiden and the subsequent quest for her return. The final couplet in this stanza, 'prekrasnoi docher'iu svoei / Gorditsia staryi Kochubei' (193), plays the role of a Proppian interdiction which a villain is certain to violate in order to produce the antagonism which drives the plot.<sup>26</sup> The use of negative analogy in this stanza – the three lines beginning 'ne...' showing the extent of Kochubei's love for his daughter – is another poetic device commonly found in Slavic folklore. Thus, even from the very first stanza, Pushkin's attempt at writing undistorted history is undercut by reliance on a folkloric narrative structure.

Both poems begin with the Hetman involved in a forbidden love affair: Canto I of *Poltava* depicts the affair between Mazepa and Kochubei's daughter Mariia; Mazeppa's interpolated narrative in Byron's poem commences with a

<sup>25</sup> Smolev 2009; see note 14.

<sup>26</sup> According to Propp, the antagonism which drives the folktale plot is frequently established by an interdiction [*zapret*], which is then immediately broken, leading to the entrance of the villain. See V. Propp, *Morphology of the folktale*, trans. by Laurence Scott, ed. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson (Bloomington, IN: Research Center, 1958). The description of Kochubei's pride in his beautiful daughter clearly foreshadows the breaking of the father-daughter bond, so it too might be considered an interdiction.



description of his affair with Theresa, the wife of a Polish nobleman (l. 181 ff). The structural parallels in the depiction of these two relationships allow Pushkin to parody Byron: Pushkin implies that he portrays a historical love affair with meaningful consequences, while suggesting that Byron concentrated on a mythologized relationship. Once again, Pushkin adds footnotes emphasizing the historical truth of his claims, and even admits to minor deviations from historical fact: for example that Mariia was truly known as Matrena. However, such admissions by Pushkin actually reinforce the idea that the general narrative of the poem is one of undisputed historical truth, with only occasional moments of poetic licence.

Pushkin's second stanza describes Mariia's beauty, a section roughly analogous to Byron's description of Theresa in Stanza 5 of his poem. Byron describes Theresa as an Oriental maiden – 'she had the Asiatic eye' (l. 208) – and then uses a powerful simile to compare her face to that of a martyred saint:

All love, half languor and half fire,  
Like Saints that at the Stake expire –  
And lift their raptured looks on high  
As though it were a joy to die. (ll. 216–219)

Pushkin's Southern Poems had heroines who were described in a similar way to Theresa. For example, the description of Zarema, the Georgian heroine of *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan* (1821) is captivating, enigmatic, Orientalized and owes much to Byron:

[...] Но кто с тобою,  
Грузинка, равен красотою?  
Вокруг лилейного чела  
Ты косу дважды обвила  
Твои пленительные очи  
Яснее дня, чернее ночи; (130)

Here, *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan* juxtaposes this dark, Orientalized Zarema with the fair, Slavic Mariia, who manages to outdo her Oriental counterpart in gaining the attention of the Girei.

However, by the time Pushkin wrote *Poltava*, the Oriental Zarema figure has vanished and full space has been given to the Mariia figure, now depicted as an

authentically Slavic heroine. Pushkin denotes Mariia's ethnicity by appropriating nature imagery of the national landscape to describe her. She is compared to the season of spring, a poplar tree, a swan, a fallow deer; her eyes are compared to dark clouds and her lips to roses:

И то сказать: в Полтаве нет  
Красавицы, Марии равной.  
Она свежа, как вешний цвет,  
Взлелеянный в тени дубравной  
Как тополь киевских высот,  
Она стройна. [...] (193)

The imagery here owes more to the odic tradition than the Romantic love lyric. Pushkin uses eighteenth-century lexical and syntactic features in this description: the short adjectives ('svezha'; 'stroina') and Slavonicisms ('veshnii'; 'krasa'). Perhaps this rhetoric anticipates the odic language which will describe the Tsar in the third stanza, or perhaps it is intended to convey the early eighteenth-century setting of the play. Unusually for Pushkin, the description risks falling into clichés: 'svezha kak veshnii tsvet' appears hackneyed, and the comparison of her figure to a poplar tree is not entirely successful. Here, Pushkin's double-voiced parody causes the reader to reconsider Byron's Theresa, who may be Polish but who retains clear Oriental properties, features which also reveal her fictionality. Pushkin tries to court reader sympathy by presenting an authentically Slavic heroine who exhibits none of the traits of the Oriental maiden.

Indeed, it is significant that Pushkin substitutes the name 'Matrena' – the name of the historical Kochubei's daughter – with Mariia. Although Pushkin mentions this change in a footnote, as though it were a mere stylistic change, it is an alteration with significant consequences. Replacing the prosaic 'Matrena' with the loaded 'Mariia' clearly adds a Christian mythological dimension to the story.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, when Mazepa enters into sexual relations with the heroine,

<sup>27</sup> Pushkin had already exploited the Christian mythological dimension of 'Mariia' in *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan*, who bears important parallels with her namesake in *Poltava*. Just as the dubious Mazepa enchants the Mariia of *Poltava*, so the Mariia of *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan* is held captive by the Turkish and Muslim khan Girei. The Mariia of *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan* is also compared to spring: 'byla, kak veshnii den', iasna' (*Sob. soch.*, III, 148) and has a proud father who considers her his only joy, and who dies, like Kochubei, following his daughter's disappearance. Both Mariias are indubitably linked to the Virgin Mary of the Bible. In *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan*, one striking image renders this Mariia an illuminated icon: 'Tam den' i noch' gorit lampada / Pred likom devy presviatoi' (*Sob. soch.*, III, 149).

he is violating not merely the Christian prohibition on fornication, but they are also desecrating Christianity itself by sullyng the eternal Virgin.

However, Pushkin encounters a number of problems when trying to turn the historical Matryona Kochubei into the mythological Virgin Mary. Firstly, unlike the Mariia of *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan*, who is a prisoner and victim of rape, the *Poltava* Mariia chooses to elope with Mazepa and their relations are consensual. The fact that Pushkin does not stage the Mazepa–Mariia relationship as a kidnapping and rape may be a partial concession to historical truth on Pushkin's part. Historical details are scanty, and it is difficult to know what sources Pushkin accessed, but it now seems that the historical Mariia Kochubei willingly went to live with Mazepa, and it was actually her father who had to remove her by force and sent her to a convent.<sup>28</sup> Pushkin presents a Mariia who consents to Mazepa, though the text implies sorcery on the part of the Hetman. His poem omits the fact that Mariia's father Kochubei finds Mariia and sends her to a convent. Including this event would transform Kochubei from a proud, protective father into a patriarch who stifles love, and risk changing Mariia and Mazepa's passion into a forbidden romance which could attract reader sympathy. Once again, Pushkin's poem does not live up to its claim of historical accuracy: the poet excludes awkward facts when they threaten to redefine the genre of his poem.

Mariia's dual role – as both the abducted virgin daughter of the folktale and the passionate Romantic heroine – ultimately introduces problematic tensions in the poem. On one hand, the narrator exhibits some sympathy towards Mariia, hinting that her feelings are the result of a sinister enchantment by Mazepa:

Своими чудными очами  
Тебя старик заворожил,  
Своими тихими речами  
В тебе он совесть усыпил. (206)

Here, the lexis used suggests a fairy tale rather than a historical drama: both 'zavorozhit' and 'usypit' are used in Russian to describe the actions of a sorcerer and the repeated instrumental endings 'imi', 'ymi', 'ami' mimic an incantation. Yet at other moments, Mariia is blamed for being an active participant in the tragedy that unfolds. For example, in the dramatic dialogue in Canto II, she

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Babinski, *The Mazeppa Legend in European Romanticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1974), 82.

voluntarily makes a vow to Mazepa that she will favour him over her father, and the conclusion of the poem calls her a ‘greshnaia deva’ and a ‘doch’-prestupnitsa’ (235). Ultimately, the reader is unsure if Mariia should be read as aggressor or victim.

Of course, the inclusion of supernatural elements does not preclude the possibility of psychologically-sophisticated characterization. For example, critics generally accept that the Three Witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606) add to – rather than detract from – the complex psychological examination of the hero.<sup>29</sup> A sympathetic reading of *Poltava* might compare Mariia with Macbeth, arguing that both are tragic figures who cause social disorder partly because they are the victims of external forces – the witches tempt Macbeth and Mazepa seduces Mariia – and partly because they yield to these external forces rather than resisting them. One could draw textual evidence for such an interpretation from the deluded Mariia’s speech where she fails to recognize Mazepa: this moment represents a moment of recognition when her madness paradoxically allows her to see Mazepa’s weaknesses. The speech is arguably one of the poem’s strongest passages, laden with Shakespearean pathos:

[...] Оставь меня.  
 Твой взор насмешлив и ужасен.  
 Ты безобразен. Он прекрасен!  
 В его глазах блестит любовь,  
 В его речах такая нега!  
 Его усы белее снега,  
 А на твоих засохла кровь! (234)

However, such a comparison with *Macbeth* ultimately fails. In Shakespeare’s play, the witches entice Macbeth through a tempting promise of political power, so we can choose to read Macbeth’s descent and downfall as entirely psychologically-motivated, without recourse to supernatural explanations. By contrast, *Poltava* offers no plausible psychological motivation for Mariia’s attraction to Mazepa. Crucially, the poem never shows Mazepa from Mariia’s point of view:

<sup>29</sup> The edition of Shakespeare used for *Macbeth* and other plays is *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997). There is an immense literature on the psychology of *Macbeth* which reads the Witches as manifestations of Macbeth’s unconscious. For a summary, see *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 274.

he is shown only as a source of depraved sexual feeling, never an object of authentic sexual passion or love. When Pushkin's contemporaries questioned him about the incredulity of Mariia's love for Mazepa, Pushkin directed them to Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1603) and Desdemona's unlikely love for the play's eponymous hero.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, Desdemona's love for an aged Moor would have been as socially inappropriate in sixteenth-century Venice as Mariia's love for her elderly godfather in eighteenth-century Ukraine. However, surely Othello has redeeming virtues that Pushkin's Mazepa does not: he possesses both loyalty and honour and the tragedy of the play comes in the manipulation of his weaknesses at the hands of a villain.<sup>31</sup> Bayley's comparison of Mazepa and Iago is more apt, but Mazepa lacks the evil artistry of Shakespeare's villain and Pushkin simply does not depict Mazepa with enough gravity or cunning to justify a parallel with Iago.<sup>32</sup> In the final stanzas of the poem, Mazepa receives no fitting punishment and has no spectacular demise, but is chased away by Russians:

И где же Мазепа? где злодей?  
 Куда бежал Иуда в страхе?  
 Зачем король не меж гостей?  
 Зачем изменник не на плахе? (231)

Mazepa is not a worthy adversary who manipulates with the skill of an Iago, but a cowardly Judas who runs away rather than face Peter in battle, and who is ultimately forgotten.

Those who defend Pushkin's portrait of Mazepa as an ambivalent, Shakespearean hero have argued that his love for Mariia is depicted as genuine and that this authentic feeling assuages the poem's critique of his political actions. For example, Mazepa assures Mariia that he loves her more than power and glory when she suspects him of having an affair:

Мария, верь: тебя люблю  
 Я больше славы, больше власти. (208)

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Bayley, 120.

<sup>31</sup> Once again, the critical literature on *Othello* is too extensive to cite here. Suffice to say that *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* points out that 'most nineteenth-century critics found Othello convincingly noble' (333) and gives a brief summary of the pro- and anti-Othello factions in twentieth-century criticism.

<sup>32</sup> Bayley, 121.

Sympathetic readings of the poem take Mazepa at face value here, arguing that he is in conflict between his love for Mariia and his political ambitions.<sup>33</sup> However, there is no evidence in the poem that Mazepa is telling the truth here: if it is true that he values her above political fame, why does he choose to become involved in political intrigue, and why does she complain that she rarely sees him? Mazepa is not compelled to plot against Peter. Pushkin's Mazepa is not a complex hero who finds circumstances entangle his personal fate with politics, like the unfortunate Evgenii of *Mednyi vsadnik* (1833), but as a power-hungry villain whose lust drives him to seduce Mariia in Canto I and to gain political control over the Ukraine in Canto II.

Byron presents the forbidden love between Mazeppa and Theresa as a titillating story of cuckoldry: Mazeppa describes how he, 'a goodly stripling' (l. 181) elopes with a woman who has the misfortune to have a husband some thirty years her senior. As in most Romantic tales of cuckoldry, the perspective of the husband is ignored. Mazeppa dehumanizes the Count by describing him in exaggerated terms: he is 'rich as a Salt mine' (l. 156), 'proud... as if from heaven he had been sent' (l. 158), and exhibits 'something more than wroth' (l. 327) when discovering his wife's infidelity. Significantly, Mariia and Mazepa in *Poltava* do not break the prohibition of a cuckolded husband – such a titillating narrative would evoke too much sympathy for Mazepa – but the prohibition of a protective father looking out for a young girl.

Here, Pushkin parodies Byron by transforming Mazepa into the Count: he is the aged man from whom Maria should be escaping, not running. Pushkin further heightens the idea of Mariia's love for Mazepa as inappropriate by alluding to his status as Mariia's godfather:

Он, должный быть отцом и другом  
Невинной крестницы своей. (195)

While Byron's lovers find their meetings 'doubly sweet' (l. 311) because of the societal disapproval that they risked on discovery, Pushkin's Mazepa and Mariia are not merely breaking social conventions but also a religious taboo: in Orthodoxy, it is sinful to enter into sexual relations with a godparent. Additionally, Pushkin may also be alluding to here to a well-known national foundation myth

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<sup>33</sup> Burns, 92.

of Russia. According to the medieval *Povest' vremennykh let*, Princess Ol'ga managed to trick Emperor Constantine VII out of marrying her because he was her godfather, a ruse that safeguarded the independence of the newly-Christianized Rus'.<sup>34</sup> When Pushkin's Mariia fails to follow the example of Ol'ga, and instead accepts Mazepa's proposition, this error endangers the future of the Russian nation, allowing Mazepa to betray Peter I and join forces with Charles XII of Sweden.

When the two lovers in Byron's poem are discovered, Mazeppa describes his own cruel punishment in great detail. It is a grand punishment befitting of a Romantic hero: he is tied naked to a wild horse which is then set loose and runs south from Poland to Ukraine. The thrilling climax of the poem is not in Mazeppa's relationship with Theresa, but the wild ride on horseback that occupied the rest of the poem. The consequences for Theresa and the Count are never described. By contrast, Pushkin reduces the flight of his lovers – also on horseback – to two or three lines, and emphasizes the worry and concern of Mariia's parents. Mariia derives no sensual pleasure from union with Mazepa: she is deathly pale before her elopement in Canto I, and at the beginning of Canto II she is already questioning the strength of Mazepa's love for her.

While Byron stages Theresa's husband as the unforgiving cuckold who seeks vengeance on a grand scale, Pushkin imagines Mariia's father as a Christ figure who dies at the hands of Mazepa's men and leaves vengeance to God. The interrogation and execution scenes are among the strongest in the poem, and in one of the best speeches in the poem, Kochubei describes how the first two of his three treasures have been taken from him: his honour and his daughter. The third remains intact for God to deliver: his revenge. Thus, like Christ, Kochubei does not take action against his persecutors, promising to leave vengeance to God the Father. In the poem, however, it is Tsar Peter who delivers the vengeance in Canto III. Here, Pushkin not only stages Kochubei as a Christ figure, but also implies Pushkin is justifying Peter's military conquests as acts of God.

It is true that the interrogation and execution scenes in *Poltava* are dramatically powerful and they can be read as a historical corrective to Byron, by emphasizing the bloodiness that inevitably accompanies revolutionary political change.

<sup>34</sup> On the Princess Olga myth, see Thomas Riha, *Readings in Russian Civilization. Vol. 1: Russia before Peter the Great*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), 6.

However, the simple dichotomy of good and evil presented here deprives the passage of any moral complexity. Once again, the language of the characters echoes Shakespeare, but the underlying content lacks Shakespearean moral complexity. We might compare this interrogation scene to the closing scene of *The Merchant of Venice* (1598), where Shylock demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. While most critics accept that there is a degree of moral complexity involved in Shakespeare's scene, Pushkin's interrogation scene is a restaging of the Bible that mythologizes history rather than a serious attempt to deal with its moral complexities.<sup>35</sup> In this instance, as in the transformation of Matrena into Mariia, Pushkin transforms national history into eschatological metaphor.

Perhaps Pushkin's most obvious attempt to re-write Byron comes in Canto III of *Poltava*, which depicts the glory of Peter I's conquest of Russia. Byron uses Mazepa's defeat only as a framing narrative: he depicts Mazeppa and King Charles XII retreating. Charles XII appreciates the battle-hardened Mazeppa's resolve, and Mazeppa offers his tale of youthful adventure to calm the King and help him sleep. In the closing lines, Byron's Mazeppa prepares for bed anticipating that tomorrow will be a brighter day. Pushkin deliberately sets out to write the opposite: in *Poltava*, it is dawn, not dusk, and Charles tries to wake the despondent Mazepa and spur him into action. Pushkin's Mazepa, however, is no stoic, and his final ride away from the battle has none of the Romanticism of his wild ride from Poland in Byron's poem:

Тоска, тоска его снедает;  
 В груди дыханье стеснено.  
 И молча он коня седляет,  
 И скачет с беглым королем,  
 И страшно взор его сверкает,  
 С родным прощаясь рубежом. (301)

Like Byron, Pushkin adopts a contemporary vantage point to re-assess the legacy of Mazepa: the 'proshlo sto let...' device in Canto III creates a space to comment on his historical significance. While Byron aggrandizes his Mazeppa by implying a parallel with Napoleon, Pushkin ardently asserts that 'zabyt Mazepa s davnikh por!' Ironically, this statement is at odds with the poem itself: if Mazepa had

<sup>35</sup> On the rich variety of critical responses to Shylock, see *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, 290.



truly been forgotten, there would have been no need for a poem which seeks to re-inscribe his treason and cowardice.

Ultimately, Pushkin's poem trumpets a particular political message rather than creating an ambivalent account of Mazepa's actions. Of course, Pushkin was under no obligation to produce a historically-accurate work that presented complex, ambivalent characters. Indeed, the stringent censorship of Tsarist Russia required patriotic works. However, the censor did not require Pushkin to propagate the idea that he was writing a serious historical study to rival immature Romantic works like Byron's, a claim that critics have not been quick enough to challenge. Moreover, the genre of *Poltava* – the *poema* – does not predetermine its ideology. In *Tsygany* (1827; written 1824), Pushkin had already proven his ability to utilize the *poema* to interrogate the myth of the noble savage, and he would later perform a subtle and complex investigation of the dynamics of empire in *Mednyi vsadnik*. Russian journalists today accept Pushkin's negative, mocking portrayal of Mazepa as historically accurate. Unfortunately we can only imagine how contemporary Russian historians might view this figure if Pushkin had written *Poltava* with the same degree of sophisticated ambivalence and penetrating psychological insight found in *Mednyi vsadnik*.

What, then, of Byron's poem: does it offer any new insight for the current controversy in Ukraine and Russia? In many respects, his *Mazeppa* is the conventional Byronic hero, a now jaded man who experienced overwhelming passions in the past, and who uses inflated hyperbolic cliché to describe his feelings: 'And such as I am love indeed / In fierce extremes – in good and ill' (ll. 226–227). Elsewhere, he declares 'I'd give / the Ukraine back again to live / It o'er once more' (ll. 304–306) and uses an oxymoron to describe the consequences of his love for Theresa: it is a 'happy doom' (l. 297). One might well imagine, as Pushkin did, that an Englishman reworking a popular myth about an exotic hero could have nothing of interest to say about the historical realities of the Russian Empire.

However, a careful reading of the framing stages of Byron's poem – before and after *Mazeppa* finishes recounting the tale of his wild ride – reveals a more ambiguous hero who has a complex relationship to the war which he has just fought and to history. In the final section of Byron's poem *Mazeppa* emerges as a more mature man than the King: he exhibits a philosophical pragmatism in the face of defeat, and turns his attention to practical matters when the King cannot.

He ties up the horses, organizes shelter for the evening, and even helps Charles get much-needed rest by telling him the story of his youth. Though Jerome McGann's characterization of Byron's Mazeppa as an existentialist 'Meursault' figure is perhaps a stretch, his basic argument that the worldly, restrained Mazeppa is able to face the consequences of defeat better than the bloodthirsty Charles, seems plausible.<sup>36</sup> While Charles is grief-stricken by his failure and suffering from insomnia, Mazeppa offers a stoic patience which allows him to accept the futility of defeat. Byron's poem closes not with a Romantic flourish but a prosaic scene of Mazeppa tending Charles' wounds and preparing camp for the evening. These lines are worth quoting in full:

[‘]What Mortal his own doom may guess?  
 Let none despond – let none despair –  
 Tomorrow the Borysthenes  
 May see our coursers graze at ease  
 Upon his Turkish banks, and never  
 Had I such welcome for a river  
 As I shall yield when safely there –  
 Comrades – Good Night!’ – 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 when'er  
 The hour arrived, no matter where;  
 His eyes the hastening slumbers steep –  
 And if ye marvel Charles forgot  
 To thank his tale, *he* wondered not –  
 The King had been an hour asleep. (*Mazeppa*, ll. 853–869)

Jane Stabler argues that these concluding lines of *Mazeppa*, with the humorous twist of the King falling asleep, offer an example of postmodernism *avant la lettre*: ‘the thrills and spills of another set of fugitive exploits are mockingly undercut by a narrative frame which draws attention to boredom in the audience’.<sup>37</sup> My reading is less ambitious and does not require the term ‘postmodern’, but it

<sup>36</sup> Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 183.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Stabler, ‘Byron, Postmodernism and Intertextuality’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. D. Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 265.

is certainly true that Byron rejects the grand narrative approach of history while emphasizing history's fundamental unknowability: 'What Mortal his own doom may guess? Let none despond – let none despair –'. Byron also stresses the lack of closure in history: despite the defeat, 'Tomorrow the Borysthenes / May see our coursers graze with ease'. In Byron's poem, time is open and thus he allows the possibility of change and regeneration, unlike Pushkin's *Poltava*, which imagines a pseudo-historical universe which operates in a Christian mythological framework, where God's vengeance, embodied in the form of Tsar Peter I, arrives upon the devilish Mazepa.

In a prescient article entitled 'Ikh Pushkin' (1999), the Russian journalist Maksim Sokolov condemned the appropriation of Pushkin and his work by the Russian political establishment, and even foresaw the nationalistic fervour that would surround the tercentenary of the battle of Poltava in 2009.<sup>38</sup> Sokolov may be right to chastise politicians for naive misappropriations of Pushkin. However, one must admit that in the case of *Poltava*, Pushkin provides a ready-made arsenal for contemporary Russian nationalists to exploit: he pre-empted the idea that his poem offers a historically-accurate representation of Mazepa, and also created a precedent for depicting Russian history in mythologized Christian terms.

One cannot recommend that either the contemporary Ukrainian history textbooks or the Russian newspapers use Byron's poem as a source of information about Mazepa and the nature of his role in the Great Northern War. There is not even the pretence of historical accuracy in his *Mazeppa*. However, it might be refreshing and beneficial for those involved in the current feud over the tercentenary of *Poltava* to take into account the detached view of history offered therein. Even if the historical Mazepa was nothing like Byron's hero, who could extract himself from his immediate situation to think about the inevitable return to practical concerns of day-to-day survival after ideological or military conflict, that skill is one which would surely be useful to Russian and Ukraine in their current impasse.

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<sup>38</sup> Maksim Sokolov, 'Ikh Pushkin', *Izvestiia*, June 15, 1999, 1 and 6. Translated excerpts appear in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, No. 23, Vol. 51, July 1999, 12.