This paper will focus on two of Byron’s dramas which are formally very different - the unity-observing tragedy *Sardanapalus* and the fragmentary experiment *The Deformed Transformed* – tracing the dynamics of heroic transformation therein. Driven to change by an impending political crisis, Sardanapalus’s famously late transformation from hippie pacifist into armoured monarch is in effect only a transformation into an ineffectual pose – a martial heroic pose, the pose Sardanapalus was meant to don all along to satisfy the dictating tradition of the empire, but for which it is now too late. As such, Sardanapalus’s final act of tragic transformation critically reflects on the politics of heroism and empire. In *The Deformed Transformed*, Byron further ironizes the very idea that anybody, transformed or otherwise, can be heroized by politics. Everybody is by definition deformed – we are shown that this is and always has been the way of the world. Byron truly wants a hero here – and, as in *Don Juan*, the vacancy is filled by the commentator figure, the anti-heroic and de-heroizing ‘everlasting Sneerer’, the supernatural Stranger. The burning ‘light to lesson ages’ in both dramas seems to be that big historical moments can only produce transformations of deformity into other kinds of deformity. In Byron’s dramas, History is a monstrous catalogue of ceaseless violence and upheaval. Becoming a hero requires a pact in blood – making a Faustian deal with History, while Heroism is something History requires in order to perpetuate itself.

Byron’s Sardanapalus is a historical anomaly – at the helm of the first and oldest of empires, he is heroically unheroic: he is adamant in his refusal to engage in the empire game that he is expected to play. His tragic flaw, sloth and woeful impracticality aside, is his naïve belief that he is being able to transform the empire from an agonistic game of thrones into a realm of peace simply by opting out of the game.

A hero is, by definition, a legendary or mythological figure, sometimes of divine descent, endowed with great strength or ability – in short, it is traditionally an illustrious warrior or a

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person who shows great courage. Crucially, Byron’s Sardanapalus imagines himself to be the opposite of this heroic scheme – his strategy is, in classical terms, a reveling in *placida quies* – a calm repose – the very antithesis of heroic effort in classical heroic topoi, where rest and sleep connote death.

The heroic game of thrones that is the game of empire and, in the grander scheme of things, History, is nicely summarized in the lines of Arbaces, the ‘warlike puppet’ of the ‘master-mover’ traitor priest, Beleses: ‘Thou hast seen my life at stake – and gaily played for: / But here is more upon the die – a kingdom.’ For Arbaces, then, this coup is a *coup de des* worth a kingdom. Arbaces represents the adverse side of soldierly courage in the play, lacking loyalty, and so stands as a foil to Salamenes, Sardanapalus’s brother-in-law, whose heroism remains untainted by such failings. Byron’s drama does not stop at this status quo of heroic reflections on the side of good and evil, however, but goes on to problematize the ethical spectrum of heroism. Sardanapalus presents a problem for the heroic game of dice played by Arbaces:

Arbaces:

… To have plucked
A bold and bloody despot from his throne,
And grappled with him, clashing steel with steel,
That were heroic or to win or fall;²
But to upraise my sword against this silkworm,
And hear him whine…

(II, ii, 83-88)

Arbaces is worried about his stakes in history, as fighting an un-heroic king is more shaming than glorious. The agonistic code prescribes rules even for a coup – and the deposition of a ‘silkworm’ does not count as a heroic deed.

As portrayed in Byron’s drama, Sardanapalus’s peaceful reign presents a major, unprecedented problem - History is at an impasse. The Assyrian annals are ‘full of blood’, but the empire is now running on empty as the war show has stopped. No more heroic history is being written, in blood, because of Sardanapalus’s pacifist persuasion:

Sardanapalus:

’Tis true I have not shed
Blood as I might have done, in oceans, till

² Emphasis mine.
My name became the synonyme of death –
A terror and a trophy.
I feel no penitence; my life is love:
If I must shed blood, it shall be by force.
(I, ii, 402-407)

Yet, as Coleridge suggests, ancestral voices are forever prophesying war. Indeed they call out for it. They tease and tempt the present into acts of heroism with the bait of glory. To win glory is to enter history, and everyone but Sardanapalus is playing the heroism game. Indeed, everyone, including Myrrha, seems determined that Sardanapalus should play too:

Myrrha: **Look to the annals of thine Empire’s founders.**

Sardanapalus: **They are so blotted o’er with blood, I cannot.**
But what wouldst have? **the Empire has been founded.**
I cannot go on multiplying empires.

Myrrha: **Preserve thine own.**

Sardanapalus: **At least, I will enjoy it.**
Come, Myrrha, let us go on to the Euphrates:
The hour invites, the galley is prepared,
And the pavilion, decked for our return,
In fit adornment for the evening banquet,
*Shall blaze with beauty and with light,* until
It seems unto the stars which are above us
Itself an opposite star; and we will sit
Crowned with fresh flowers like –

Myrrha: **Victims.**

Sardanapalus: **No, like sovereigns,**
The *Shepherd Kings of patriarchal times*,
Who knew no brighter gems than summer wreaths,
And none but tearless triumphs.

(I, ii, 547-562)

Against Myrrha’s various attempts to prod Sardanapalus into heroic action, to engage with History, Sardanapalus’s wish to be ‘like the shepherd kings of old, knowing no gems but flowers’ is essentially a wish to altogether step out of history and its agonistic rules of empire-building back into the realm of myth which precedes historical annals, recalling Salamenes’s complaint in

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3 All emphasis mine.
his opening soliloquy: ‘I will not see thirteen hundred years of Empire end like a Shepherds’ tale’. In generic literary terms, Sardanapalus refuses to enter the frame of traditional heroic epic and dallies in the alternative of an artificial bucolic idyll.

Sardanapalus’s obstinate line of ‘doing it his way’ is also a paradoxical attempt at making History by standing outside it, a feat of intricate irony on Byron’s part – Sardanapalus’s distinctive imperial mode is to simply not play the empire game, his bid to enter History is based on not entering the violent Faustian deal demanded by History – on a refusal to spill blood. Byron presents a canny critique of heroism through Sardanapalus’s retorts to the beckoning of Salamenes, his traditionally minded brother-in-law, who claims Sardanapalus’s has given his people ‘more peace than is glorious’ – to which Sardanapalus defiantly replies: ‘if this [meaning Semiramis’s failed Indian campaign whence she returned with ‘scarce twenty warriors’] is glory, let me live in ignominy forever.’ In another clever paradox in Byron’s play, the rhetoric of Sardanapalus’s persistent resistance to heroism is itself heroic.

Sardanapalus’s passive disengagement of from the public sphere and his refusal to provide a show of power, however, creates a vacuum that demands to be filled. Sardanapalus’s insistence on peace, by willfully stopping the Empire machine and suspending its agonistic mechanisms, is in the end precisely what makes these mechanisms reassert themselves with all the more vigour and brutality, to overwhelm him and swiftly fill the vacuum of peace. The notion of peace may promise stability, security and calm, but history is upheaval and change.

The drama thus presents a sustained, if cynical, meditation on the absolute necessity of heroism and through this, on the nature of History. Reading between the lines, it would seem that in order to create chaos, history requires the pacifist Sardanapalus. As in Foucault’s reading of Nietzsche, wirkliche Historie - real History - is here ‘an endlessly repeated play of dominations’4: History does not ‘gradually progress from combat to combat’ towards something other than combat. History simply proceeds from ‘domination to domination’5. History perpetually

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5 Foucault, op. cit., p.151.
alternates the dominators and the dominated, and to do this needs, in the end, the strong to become weak and the weak to become strong.

What, then, is Sardanapalus’s light to lesson ages? Sardanapalus is essentially seeking to buy a stairway not only to heaven, but, crucially, to History – his act equates him with the ruling principles of the universe in the heliocentric religion, while claiming to become ‘not a mere a beacon on the horizon for a day’ but also ‘a light to lesson ages’, is basically an act of historical apotheosis; once again, Sardanapalus wishes to be, or believes himself entitled to be, a special case:

Sardanapalus: … Time shall quench full many
A people’s records, and a hero’s acts;
Sweep empire after empire, like this first
Of empires, into nothing; but even then
\textbf{Shall spare this deed of mine, and hold it up}
A \textbf{problem} few dare imitate, and none
Despise…

The flood of Time shall drown countless records and ‘many a hero’s act’, but the fiery pyre of Sardanapalus shall, one way or another, survive – why, because it is a problem, a puzzle. This bold statement is quintessentially Byronic – it is effortlessly, synchronically sure of itself while built on a historical paradox. Like Manfred’s ‘tis not so difficult to die’, it is a fundamentally opaque utterance. It is part delusion, in the belief that ages \textit{can} be lessoned – judging by Diodorus’ account in his universal history, the \textit{Bibliothēkē}, history has very much dared to ‘despise’ the problem of Sardanapalus, portraying him as a man of little value who ‘outdid all his predecessors in luxury and sluggishness’, ‘practiced sexual indulgence of both kinds without restraint’ and ‘not only did he end his own life in a disgraceful manner, but he caused the total destruction of the Assyrian Empire, which had endured longer than any other known to history.’

If the thing remains a problem at the end of \textit{Sardanapalus}, it becomes the meat of Byron’s satirical spiel on history in \textit{The Deformed Transformed}. Heroism in \textit{The Deformed Transformed} is not only a contested issue – in a feat of satirical wit, the drama presents a total wipeout of ideals concerning heroes and heroism, starting with the classical fashion show at the beginning

\footnote{6 Emphasis mine.}

\footnote{7 Diodorus Siculus, 2.23, http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/database/gen_html/a0000776.php.}
wherein a classical hero is merely an empty shell to be worn, no more than a ‘shadow of beauty and power’. Come 1527, the hero, beautiful and desirable, has been reduced to an aesthetic object which is woefully out of proportion with contemporary life. Erasing epic distance and its absolute values and placing the classical hero in the contemporary world, Byron imagines it an archaeological feat which spotlights the modern world’s diminished proportions:

Stranger: … But thou, my manikin, would’st soar a show Rather than hero. 
... by being 
A little less removed from present men 
In figure, thou canst sway them more; for all 
Would rise against thee now, as if to hunt 
A new found mammoth⁸; and their cursed engines, Their culverins and so forth, would find way Through our friend’s armour there, with greater ease Than the adulterer’s arrow through his heel…

(I, i, 299-308)

Achilles, a demigod hero out of time, place and larger-than-life in any modern setting would ‘soar a show rather than hero’, ‘a new-found mammoth’, unable to stand a chance against modern weapons – beautiful, but useless. And yet history still requires violence on a ‘heroic’ scale.

Arnold: … But name your compact: Must it be signed in blood? 

Stranger: Not in your own. 

Arnold: Whose blood then? 

Stranger: We will talk of that hereafter. But I’ll be moderate with you, for I see Great things within you. You shall have no bond But your own will, no contract save your deeds.

(I, i 146-151)

In The Deformed Transformed, Byron presents his own twist on the Faustian contract – here, the price for granted wishes is still blood, but not the supplicant’s. The price for entering into and

⁸ Emphasis mine.
participating in History is ‘great’ ‘deeds’, and, as the Stranger points out, Glory’s ‘mild twin’ is ‘Gore’. The way into History is heroism, but on the way to heroism you inevitably get dirty:

Stranger: You are well entered now

Arnold: Aye; but my path
Has been o’er carcasses: mine eyes are full
Of blood.

(II, I, 1-4)

Having been ‘lured on through scenes of blood and lust’, Arnold’s wish to be ‘at peace – in peace!’. This resonates powerfully with Sardanapalus’s wish to sustain a peaceful empire, a historical oxymoron in itself. But it is at this point that The Deformed Transformed most pointedly moves beyond Sardanapalus’s cynicism about heroism and towards something rather more like nihilism. The Stranger, now aptly ycleped Caesar, replies as follows:

Caesar: And where would’st thou be?

Arnold: Oh, at peace – in peace!

Caesar: And where is that which is so? From the star
To the winding worm, all life is motion; and
In life commotion is the extremest point
Of life. The planet wheels till it becomes
A comet, and destroying as it sweeps
The stars, goes out. The poor worm winds its way,
Living upon the death of other things,
But still, like them, must live and die, the subject
Of something which has made it live and die.
You must obey what all obey, the rule
Of fixed necessity: against her edict
Rebellion prospers not.

Arnold: And when it prospers –

Caesar: ‘Tis no rebellion.

(I, ii, 21-33)

The very idea of peace is played down as an impossibility in the grand scheme of things. The one law of the universe is, according to Byron’s supernatural commentator, as follows: once born, be

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9 Emphasis mine.
it as planet or as worm, one must ‘live and die’, be ‘subject’, ‘obey’. And all life is driven
towards ‘commotion’ - wanting to be ‘at peace, in peace’ is to try and negate what life, by ‘fixed
necessity’, is. Values, ideals, philosophies do not drive the cosmos. ‘Something’ undefinable
does, and ours is simply to obey. Rebellion ‘prospers not’ – or if it does it ‘is not rebellion’ - but
it is part of the commotion of necessity - and here our earlier reading of Sardanapalus is
confirmed: whether he rebels against the cult of glory, or heroically insists on peaceful ignominy,
his rebellion against History prospers only to the extent that it is not rebellion at all, but simply
more commotion that ‘obeys what all obey’ – the ‘rule’ of Historical ‘necessity’.

According to Nietzsche, as summarized by Foucault in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy and
History’,

’[t]he forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative
mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do no manifest the
successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a
conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events.
… the world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence
or final cause, where there is only the ‘iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-
box of chance.’

In The Deformed Transformed, a play that also helps us to read Sardanapalus, as we have seen,
however, Byron is more Faustian than Nietzschean. The transformation of people into heroes is
History’s big Mephistophelean trick on humanity. History tempts men with the idea of glory. A
price has to be paid in blood – but, in a Byronic twist on the Faust story, one pays with other
people’s blood, not one’s own. And so the ‘mild twins, Gore and Glory’, walk hand in hand,
making History – Byron just caught them red-handed:

Caesar:         I cannot find my hero; he is mixed
                With the heroic crowd that now pursue
                The fugitives, or battle with the desperate.

                …
                He comes,
                Hand in hand with the mild twins – Gore and Glory.
                (II, ii, 1-3, 11-12)

10 Foucault, op. cit., pp. 154-5.