Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* and the Spirit of Liberty

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This essay is an attempt to conduct a reading of *Jerusalem* by Jez Butterworth through the lens of cultural materialism with John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* as intertext. The essay conducts a brief survey of previous scholarly treatment of the play, explains the theoretical background of cultural materialism that the essay operates on, and briefly introduces the intertext. The treatment itself is based around the invocation of historical and mythical roots in the play, exploring the relevant parts of the intertext, interspersed with close reading of the play itself. The essay culminates in the understanding that the climax and ending of the play is not an end to the concept of liberty evoked in the play, but that it is a call to action for it. While the play offers no unproblematic image which could guide the direction of action, it does offer liberty as a guiding principle.

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Riches. Fame. A glimpse of God’s tail… comes a time
you’d swap it all for a solid golden piss on English soil.
(Butterworth 10)

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England’s green & pleasant Land.
(Blake 514)

1. Introduction

The play begins before the curtains have been drawn. The very first written line, only
containing stage directions, through a faded Cross of St George on the curtain, informs
the audience that the question of England and Englishness begins. The cross appears
creatures” on the proscenium (5), drums begin to sound, followed by accordions and
pipes. The first character the audience sees, one who is both present and absent
throughout the play, is Phaedra – whose very name evokes Plato’s Phaedo aside the
different iterations of the Phaedra myths. Phaedra comes dressed as a fairy, and as such
elusive in her three representations: first, she is missing in the play, yet the audience
know of her and her presence. Second, as a fairy, she is a mythical and elusive being,
and third, as concept, Plato famously never satisfactorily settles what love is and the
very attempt at coming to a final definition seems vain. She sings the hymn Jerusalem,
from the prologue of Blake’s Milton. Already, the Romantics have been invoked,
through Blake specifically, where the audience now know that this is going to be a play
exploring spirituality and myth, England and Englishness, and will, like the Romantics,
dare to radically ask the questions. Phaedra never finishes the hymn, because she flees from the thumping bass of (what is presumably) techno, and leaves the second stanza unfinished and the audience hanging on the very last unspoken word—mills:

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon those clouded hills,
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among those dark satanic—

(Butterworth 5)

It is significant that Phaedra, the symbolic concept of love (in many ways) flees at the modern music. That she leaves the word mills unsung is similarly significant, since one of the play’s motifs is the unfeeling and callous encroaching machinery of modernity which leaves no space for the individual life, or as Boll would have it, drawing on Agamben—*homo sacer*, the bare life. Once the play has properly begun, once the music has died down and been replaced by birdsong, the scene of Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron’s trailer is shown flying “[t]he old Wessex flag (a golden Wyvern dragon against a red background)” (6), considered as England’s first national flag, a flag with a more far-reaching relationship to England than that of St George’s Cross. With the advent of the second flag, one laying claim to more originality, especially in the connection to the founding or building of Jerusalem evoked in the Blakean hymn, the question of beginnings is raised, and the very existence, essence, and origin of England and Englishness is here in question.

The following events show a ruthless bureaucracy, with cold efficiency, serving an eviction notice. Here the audience is invited into the theme mentioned above, that of the individual life, and the central theme of this essay: liberty in the contemporary age. One of the central philosophers of England, famous for expounding on the concept of liberty is John Stuart Mill with his in-depth treatment of the concept in *On Liberty*. 
Using a cultural materialist perspective the present essay reads the concept of liberty in tandem with the play, excavated from Mill’s *On Liberty* and as embodied in Johnny Byron, and in so doing reveals that the question of what role liberty is supposed to play in the contemporary world is very much at stake, accentuated by the elliptical ending of the play.

2. Exploration

*Jerusalem* has received a warm critical reception, sometimes uncritically so. The scholarly reception of the play has been smaller than is warranted, and after the first burst of publications also sparse in between. While the critical reception has embraced the play as a state-of-the-nation play genre that asks important questions about Englishness in the contemporary world, the scholarly treatment is rich in variety and perspective. While defiance is an underlying theme in the play, and one which is occasionally stressed by the critical reception, it has not received much attention by scholars. Jez Butterworth summarizes this concept of defiance, which is integral to Englishness as he sees it, in relation to oppression and a variety of fascist doctrines with the words “we’re just not having it” (Harding). The present essay, while not taking its original cue from these words, take them as supporting the need to explicate a concept which such an account of defiance must depend on—liberty.

There is no point to defining liberty as a theoretical construct, whether we attempt to use Isiah Berlin’s famous distinction between positive and negative liberty or liberty in terms of the philosophical discussion regarding free will. Such concepts do not tie easily into the play, and instead the concept of liberty is sought in its English historical roots and the social and cultural material conditions. This is why John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* fits so well with its explicit focus on “Civil or Social Liberty” (5). The play as well as this essay requires a conception of liberty concerned with the conditions of living beings in a social body politic grounded in the material conditions of human
beings. Further, the play is highly evocative, especially in terms of myth and history, and is likewise set in strongly material conditions and the tension deals with very real, tangible political difficulties. In this way, it lends itself easily to a treatment in the theory of historical materialism, mirrored in the scholarly publications which continually return to material conditions. The play evokes history in many ways, but in its most overt revolutionary evocation it invokes the Romantics, and specifically Blake and Byron. Blake is so central to the play that he is invoked with the first spoken words—the recitation of the play’s namesake hymn. However, the recitation of “Jerusalem” is interrupted at the last word of the second stanza. While ‘mills’ is left hanging in the mind of the English audience, certainly aware of the central cultural importance of the hymn, in this essay another Mill will be a central figure in the present essay. In a sentence: This essay attempts a cultural materialist reading of the play Jerusalem in tandem with an exploration into the concept of liberty in Mill’s On Liberty, revealing both the potential vivacity and vulnerability of liberty in the bureaucratized world.

2.1 Background

The following is intended as a brief survey1 of the scholarly attention to Jerusalem (2009) up until today. At this point, the descriptions of the publications are simplified and some aspects which occur in one might occur in earlier or later publications without being mentioned. The goal is not to be exhaustive at this point, but rather to give the reader an idea of the ways in which this essay relates to previously published scholarly work.

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1 Missing from the survey are the following works: First, Landscape and Englishness (2016) by David Matless and “Theatre & the Rural” (2016) by Jo Robinson, both with a focus on the rural setting of the play, where Robinson has a strongly ecocritical angle, whereas Matless utilizes the play and its setting as a shorthand to a concept of Englishness. None of these publications are of direct relevance to the aims of the present essay, which might excuse their omission. Secondly, and more damning, is the omission of Class, Culture and Tragedy in the Plays of Jez Butterworth (2021) by Sean McEvoy, which explore (among other things) the cultural critique that recurs throughout Jez Butterworth’s plays.
Jerusalem premiered in 2009, after an extended period of writing and rewriting. Its reception has been heartfelt and has been widely interpreted as a new entry in the “state-of-the-nation play” genre. It asks deep questions about Englishness and identity, and despite its extraordinarily strong critical reception, the scholarly reception has not been overwhelming. In 2011, Anna Harpin published the earliest scholarly treatment of the play. It is a thorough interpretative work focusing, among other things, on establishing the role of the setting, as well as querying from what lens of genre one ought to view the play—eventually suggesting that the play is to be understood in a modern version of classical tragedy. Harpin’s article is closely followed by Julia Boll in 2012, which puts a stronger focus on the main character, Johnny, and by having him embodying Agamben’s concept of homo sacer—the bare life—and traces the sacred and the taboo both embodied in this character, constituting the tragedy and transgression of sacrificing him. Sean Carney completes these early analyses of the play and attempts to categorize the play as ‘late modern’ (291).

The play then received a revival of academic interest starting in 2015, with David Ian Rabey. The great merit of Rabey’s piece comes in terms of making overt the intertextual connections of the play, especially in regard to William Shakespeare, but is also a source of information in terms of the actual production and performance. In 2016 Nadine Holdsworth further developed the complexity of the contemporary and preceding issues of the play through an analysis of the depiction of Romani people. In 2017 David Kerler published a strongly postmodern and post-structuralist interpretation, which also explores the intertextual aspects of the play, especially as regards William Blake’s poems. While this intertextual relation is never absent in previous scholarly work, it begins to take the main focus starting with Kerler (and, to an extent, Rabey). Kerler also attempts an interpretation of Johnny Byron’s character as a concept. This

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2 An honorary mention would be The Politics of English Nationhood by Michael Kenny. It is not quite an analysis of the play, but the play utilized to show how it has influenced the discussion of Englishness and consciousness of the English people of a sense of belonging and mythologizing in the bleak state of England’s "crumbling social fabric" (163).
interpretation is more in line with the concept of vulnerability, traced from understanding him as the Levinasian ‘face’. His treatment runs along the same lines of Boll, while dealing with a different conceptual framework. Finally, in this second period of scholarly attention, Graham Saunders, also in 2017, analyzes Jerusalem. Saunders’ analysis further develops the intertextual picture, underscoring the Shakespearian intertextual connections. Further, it discusses Anna Harpin’s ideas, and works through an understanding of the play as transformative into festive tragedy, from the more classical notion of festive comedy, as occurring on stage.

More recently, in 2019, Simon White provides a thorough intertextual reading of Jerusalem to Blake’s Milton: A Poem in Two Books. His analysis runs into a strongly ecocritical reading, which diverges on a crucial point from the interests of the present essay. Finally, Gemma Edwards, in 2021, published the final entry in the scholarly debate. Edwards performs an analysis of the kind of Englishness that is invoked in Jerusalem and contrasts this to other kinds of Englishness in later plays of other playwrights. Her final analysis relies on a reading of the final scenes of the play, and what kind of interpretative force this might have. In terms of the aims of this essay, Edwards’s interpretation misunderstands the political relevance of the play. Both White and Edwards carry out vital interpretative work but fail to realize the political significance of the play—most likely due to theoretical commitments to their respective interpretative framework, where Edwards searches for an ideal, and White’s ecocritical reading finds a redefining of “the way in which people see and describe human relations with each other and with the land” (277).

2.2 Theory

The following section outlines the fundamental theory of cultural materialism which make out the foundation which carries the structure of the essay, as well as prepare the texts for the close reading treatment. Barry defines the field of cultural materialism as “the study of historical material (which includes literary texts) within a
politicized framework, this framework including the present which those literary texts have in some way helped to shape” (185). The component parts are a combination of attention to the historical context, the theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis. Dollimore and Sinfield, in a passage which might as well have been applied to Jerusalem, explain the conception of historical context would be related to “enclosures and the oppression of the rural poor, state power and resistance to it … witchcraft, the challenge and containment of the carnivalesque” (qtd. in Barry 185). In the coming analysis it is of vital importance to remember “to concentrate on the interventions whereby men and women make their own history,” even in the face of “the ‘power of social and ideological structures’ which restrain them” (187). It is in the understanding of the material circumstances that action becomes intelligible as action, and in which the principle at stake becomes instantiated and recognizable at all.

While it is important to situate the literary text in the political situation of today, Jerusalem performs this task almost on its own, especially considering the revival of the play in the summer of 2022 and consequent burst of new critical reviews. For the purposes of this essay, this also performs the task of situating On Liberty, and perhaps more importantly, the question of liberty as a point of crisis and as central to the political situation of today. This relates the discussion to Raymond Williams’ explication of the concept structures of feeling which is a central concept historical materialism relates to. The relationship is constituted in the attempt to include, but also go beyond, the “formally held and systematic beliefs” (23), and to account for the lived and felt experience with all the complexity and nuance of meanings, values, and the interrelations and variability of these. To clarify the point, Williams summarizes:

3 This becomes more of an Arendtian point, and one which relates to the discussion more specifically in an intertheoretical discussion regarding the distinction between cultural materialism and new historicism: "Cultural Materialists see new historicists as cutting themselves off from effective political positions by their acceptance of a particular version of post-structuralism, with its radical skepticism about the possibility of attaining secure knowledge” (Barry 187). In this understanding of the new historicist work the important political aspects careen towards a discussion of knowledge and truth and away from the political significance of the act.
We are talking about characteristic elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (23-24)

For Williams, this constitutes a cultural hypothesis grounded “in a generation or period,” (24) which demands a return to evidence of this kind—belief systems, institutions, and explicit general relationships as lived and experienced, as well as social and material experience (24).

Neema Parvini helpfully summarizes: “[Raymond Williams’s] key theory […] is that culture is irreducibly complex and made up at any given time by numerous cultures which are dynamically linked to each other. At any given time, there is not just one ‘culture’ but lots of different cultures with their own geneses in different epochal moments” (86). These different cultures are all in the competition for hegemony and their statuses are constantly subject to change (86). In this sense, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony becomes directly relevant in the treatment of the theory. Relatedly, because of the importance of political commitment, there is a strong sense of possibility for actual subversion. According to Kiernan Ryan, “[c]ultural materialism seeks actively and explicitly to use the literature of yesterday to change the world of today” (qtd. in Parvini 87). Felperin identifies this as a dissatisfaction with ideological strategy that legitimizes “inequality and exploitation by representing the social order that perpetuates these things as immutable and unalterable” (qtd. in Parvini 88). Parvini suggests that
this process of normalization is as strong, if not stronger, than in the time of Shakespeare. When attempting to make sense of the project of cultural materialism, then, it is to articulate the political act in its cultural and political situatedness. In this sense, the political act is explicated in its subversiveness through a location within a system of cultural hegemonic struggle, in which the act is understood as a specifically human act—both embodying principle and lived experience.

In an interesting question of the internal marginalization of cultural materialism Parvini writes:

Does this mean I am excluded from cultural materialism and condemned to write from the centre or, heavens forbid, the right? This question is not intended as a criticism per se, rather I put it forward to highlight the highly personal and necessarily marginal nature of much cultural materialist criticism compared with new historicism. […] in complete contrast [to new historicism], cultural materialist studies are often littered with the personal politics and concerns of their authors, the cultural or textual subject often serves as the setting in which these concerns play out, but the agenda is set by the critic and not the text (90).

It bears mentioning in this context that cultural materialists are concerned in the way that historical material (which includes literary texts) have been appropriated by the culture of today, and in such a way they can very much concern an author, regardless of whether their personal identity intersects with the issue (90-91). With this understanding of the cultural materialist project, the critique by authors such as Marcus Nordlund or Richard Levin that cultural materialism is reductive of the complexity of issues to a binary relationship of good (the individual position of the text or the author) and evil (the bad aspect which is argued against) (92) does not hit the mark. This

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4 This conception of personal engagement alleviates the worry that the identity of the author governs and constrains the academic engagement and concern that Parvini raises (91).
critique will for that reason be side-stepped in the present essay and receive no further attention.

In many ways, the present essay assumes a kind of new materialism, one “increasingly focused on the human body as ‘the site of identity formation’ or of cultural resistance” (92) similar to that of Dympna Callaghan’s. If Callaghan’s is considered to be a “sophisticated version of this approach, one that argues that ’the material should not be confined to the binarism brute-material/ discursive . . . [because] the social and cultural always exceed the discursive’” (Parvini 92), then it is more in line with the analysis of structures of feeling which Williams brings to the fore above. In important ways, then, the present essay utilizes a firmly traditional account of cultural materialism, while simultaneously serving to turn it upside down. It is not so much the literary text that is brought into the present, and co-related with intertexts, but the intertext which is brought into present relevance through an evocation of the past in the play, exploring and suggesting the relevance of history to the understanding of the present moment. In the crisis point of the essay, corresponding with the climactic and elliptical ending of the play, the historical nature of the present moment becomes intelligible in the articulation of human agency and action.

2.3 Intertext

The analysis requires a presentation and treatment of the main intertext, On Liberty, and Mill will therefore be quoted at length:

The subject of this Essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will, so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of Philosophical Necessity; but Civil or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can legitimately be exercised by society over the individual. A question seldom stated and hardly ever discussed, in general terms, but which profoundly influences the practical controversies of
the age by its latent presence, and is likely soon to make itself recognized as the vital question of the future. (5)

This passage echoes the focus of liberty discussed in the introduction of the present essay. The inclusion of the final sentence is meant to suggest that the future intimated, where it would be the vital question, is here. It is in this vein that the urgency of discussing liberty in relation to the play is to be understood, which in turn facilitates an understanding of what is at stake in the play’s enacted defiance. Mill understands his essay in the following terms:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. […] In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (12-13).

While there are a number of things that Mill does in his essay, what will ultimately be of the most importance in terms of this essay is the dichotomic relationship between custom and liberty. An initial explanation:

The likings and dislikings of society, or some powerful portion of it, are thus the main thing which has practically determined the rules laid down for general observance, under the penalties of law or opinion. And in general, those who
have been in advance of society in thought and feeling, have left this condition of
things unassailed in principle, however they might have come into conflict with it
in some of its details. They have occupied themselves rather in inquiring what
things society ought to like or dislike, than in questioning whether its likings or
dislikings should be law to individuals. They preferred endeavouring to alter
feelings of mankind on the particular points on which they were themselves
heretical, rather than make common cause in defence of freedom, with heretics
generally. (10-11)

If Mill was worried about the conditions of his day, when the force of custom was
strong, he predicted an increase in state power of persecution of the non-conformist. He
reflects that “[w]hen they [people of custom] do so [realize the potentiality and
availability of governmental force], individual liberty will probably be as much exposed
to invasion from the government, as it already is from public opinion” (12). Today, it
also comes in the form of bureaucracy, the rule of no-one, which also endows it with the
muteness of violence. He sees the tendency of his time to “stretch unduly the powers of
society over the individual, both by force of opinion and even by that of legislation” and
expresses concern that “[U]nless a strong barrier of moral conviction can be raised
against the mischief, we must expect, in the present circumstances of the world, to see it
increase” (16-17).

The part of Mill’s essay which is of relevance to the present essay turns on the
region of human liberty: “the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing
the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like, subject to such
consequences as might follow: without impediment to our fellow creatures, so long as
what we do does not harm them”, claiming that where his principles are not fulfilled

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5 A reader familiar with Arendt will have already noted the theoretical indebtedness in the present essay. Since this is not a project which relies on an Arendtian interpretation, the Arendtian theoretical underpinnings will not be examined as such. However, for the sake of full transparency, they must be made overt.
society is not free (15). In other words, the aspect of liberty in which the essay relies on Mill is the discussion of exactly how much of the individual life can be left to individuality and eccentricity, the justification of this and the limitations, where the individual’s right to be left alone is trumped by society’s need to punish transgression (56-82, 93-95).

3. Close Reading and Analysis

Because of the nature and density of the play, there are many aspects of the play which regrettably but necessarily will remain unexplored. The following section consists of a brief outline of the play’s evocation of history and myth, followed by its invocation of material conditions, both focused in a close reading of the play. The scenes, the material conditions, and the close readings will, where brevity allows, be contextualized by theoretical treatment. In turn, these are related to the passages in Mill. As the analysis draws to its close, the final scenes of Jerusalem will serve to highlight the urgency of the question of liberty.

In the introduction there was a point made regarding the posing of the question of Englishness as regards the question of the two flags— “A curtain with the faded Cross of St George” (Butterworth 5) and “the old Wessex flag (a golden Wyvern dragon against a red background)” (6). The point is that through using these symbols of England, the question of the origin of England is raised, and the very sense of origin of Englishness is at stake. Further, this also raises the question of historical origin to the point that the history of England and which version of English history and origin is being enacted in the present moment. This ambiguity is heightened through the saturation of mythical beings and symbols presented together with the Cross of St George, not to mention the very tangible historically referential objects scattered around John ‘Johnny’ ‘Rooster’ Byron’s trailer in the stage directions: “An old rusted railway
sign screwed to the mobile home reads ‘Waterloo’\(^6\) [...] an old hand-cranked air-raid siren. Stuck to the porch is an old submarine klaxon.” (6, italics in original) The following events reveal how “A head appears, wearing a Second World War helmet and goggles, with loudhailer, like out of the top of a tank” (8).

These objects signal a sense of historical pride. But even this kind of historical pride is put under suspicion and ambiguity, precisely through appearing together with derelict objects and garbage scattered around Byron’s trailer: “an old mouldy couch stands on the porch deck. Lots of junk. [...] Rubbish. Empty bottles. A car seat, a swing. An old windchime. A garden table, and four red Coca Cola plastic chairs. A rusty Swingball set [...] the remains of a smashed television” (6). The very presentation and hedging of the historically motivated pride cloaks whatever pride that the English historical roots can muster with unease. This point is particularly important to note unless the interpretation of the play should suggest an uncritical acceptance and receptivity to an Englishness based on England’s past and the rural scene. Again, the cross of St George is faded and appears together with strongly mythical references, suggesting that the essence of Englishness is up for debate throughout the play and that, ultimately, England is mythical, ephemeral, and fading—and with it, the solidity of English identity. The play takes place in a moment of crisis, accentuated by the material conditions of the play. In this sense, the present essay echoes Adrian Poole’s understanding of tragedy which guides Harpin’s exploration: “tragedy stages ‘moments of crisis in a community’s understanding of itself’” (Harpin, 61).

\(^6\) Pace Kerler this sign is referencing a very tangible place with strong historical roots to England. If it is interpreted in the sense of the “signifier without a signified” (Kerler 67) weight is given to the absurd as a concept rather than the immediate historical and geographical understanding. Further, the other objects suggest a straightforward historical reading, since they are all objects with clear ties to moments when the actions of England as a nation have mattered to the history of the world. While I am not denying that the geographical reference is rather absurd on a mobile home, increasingly so given the semi-permanent state of the trailer, the claim that it is a reference without a referent is too strong. Rabey, agrees that this is a reference “to a Metropolitan borough, but also, more mythically, to the site of a legendary historical battle and victory/defeat (depending on perspective)” (Rabey 110).
As if the symbols already presented were not enough, the romantics William Blake and Lord Byron have a strong referential presence in the play. Blake is invoked first through Phaedra’s interrupted recitation of the hymn, and by name much later after a game of trivia—“Who wrote the words to the popular hymn ‘Jerusalem’?” (Butterworth, 78): “William Blake. (Pause) It was William Blake” (105) Johnny suddenly remembers after having been beaten and branded towards the end of the play. Lord Byron is invoked through Rooster Byron’s very name, but also his limp. Stephanie Forward explicates the Romantics’ desire for liberty, the conviction that people should follow ideals, and the renunciation of rationalism and order. While the Romantics might have been contending with the ideals of the Enlightenment (Forward), the Byron in the play contends with the ideals of bureaucracy and the remnants of Thatcherism. Further, the play takes place on St. George’s day, the birthday of Shakespeare. Aside from the strong ties to the literary figure, it is another strong tie to a sense of tradition that is being laid bare. Before discussing bureaucracy and Thatcherism it is worth dwelling on the figure of Johnny as a character and symbol. It ought to be noted that this is one of the more explored themes in the scholarly attention to the play, and as such most analysis on this point can also be found among the works mentioned in the scholarly background.

Johnny is simultaneously a mythical figure with shamanic powers as “categorically a sad bastard who lives alone in a caravan getting pissed and dealing drugs” (Harping 70-71). His mythical and shamanic qualities make themselves known through his eyes, “[T]he two black eyes, staring out, sharp as spears. You get close and stare into those black eyes, watch out. Written there is old words that will shake you. Shake you down” (49), much like they shake Dawn when she looks into them: “Dawn. Look into my eyes. Deeper. Now I’m going to show you something. Are you ready? / She is. Silence. […] Pause. She starts to shake” (Butterworth 70-71). Further, his shamanic and magical qualities are also exemplified in his creation of a magic “blood-
red mirror” by pouring a glass of wine into a silver plate. Addressing Troy, Johnny recalls: “you took the candle and you gazed into the mirror. (Beat.) You shook like a leaf. You couldn’t stop shaking. Couldn’t speak. You were terrified, boy. From that day, you never came back. Have you come to play again, boy?” (81). Upon hearing the incredible stories about Johnny, both from his own mouth and from others, he is revered among his “band of educationally subnormal outcasts” (53) he ambiguously dubs “Friends! Outcasts. Leeches. Undesirables” (50): “I reckon that deserves a statue. […] What did King Arthur ever do to top that?” (32). His exploits are fantastical, to the point that he casually speaks to the giant who built Stonehenge and who bestows a gift on him (57-58), specifically a drum: “He said, ‘This is for you. If you ever get in any bother, or you ever need a hand, just bang this drum and us, the giants, we’ll hear it, and we’ll come.’” (58). A fantasy which is infinitely more seductive than crass reality.

Crass reality is that he is a sad character, one which deserves sympathy, much like the song Phaedra sings “in the prologue to Act Two, featuring the lines ‘Oh, the werewolf, the werewolf / Please have sympathy / For the werewolf, he is someone / So much like you and me’” (Holdsworth 188). However, Johnny refuses to acknowledge reality, and in exasperation Dawn exclaims: “Right. Of course. I didn’t think of that. That’s stupid of me. I forgot you’re Spiderman. Fucking Supertramp. What planet are you on?” (70). He is a person both revered and reviled, one whose acquaintances, when confronted with people having found him in drunken stupor and urinating on him, casually records the scene and turns it into a joke among their peers (82-83)—a group of which Johnny is excluded from by virtue of him having a special status. As mentioned in the scholarly background, Boll conceptualizes this status as the Agambenian Homo Sacer. “a character that encapsulates both the scapegoat and the monster, and on which thus the dreams and the fears of the community equally settle” (Boll 1) or as “the one ‘who may be killed yet not sacrificed’” (2). He is shunned by society, a fact which is articulated by him finally being “barred from every pub in Flintock” (Butterworth 14).
In the scene where Johnny gets urinated on and filmed this status gets its realization: while at the same time carrying a mythical reverence, anyone can really do whatever they like to him because of his separation from any societal value. With the separation of societal value his value as a human being is similarly stripped. This lends dark connotations to his introduction: “Despite a slight limp, he moves with the balance of a dancer, or animal” (9). In a passage which highlights just how far-removed Johnny’s humanity is, he is the dragon in the professor’s recounting of the knight born in Cappadocia, who “envenoms the country” (84). This interpretation gains credence from the discussion of Mill to come later. While his status as both mythical and prosaically sad might be established, it is worth dwelling on his connection to the sacred, particularly through his connection to Christ. This is established through two stories, first through Ginger’s retelling of his death and rebirth during an insane daredevil stunt (31-32) and second through his immaculate conception by bullet (48). The scholarly discussion settles on Johnny as the knight and hero, rather than the dragon and the evil to be slain. However, this runs the risk of reducing him precisely to a mythical figure, instead of a human being of flesh and blood.

Among all these connections and connotations there is a detail that has gone unnoticed, hidden, as it were, in the one mention of Johnny’s full name: “Mr Byron. Mr John Winston Byron” is uttered by “Linda Fawcett, Senior Community Liaison Officer for Kennet and Avon County Council” (94, my emphasis) during her second visit for the day at Rooster Byron’s trailer. In fact, aside from Phaedra, Fawcett and her colleague Parsons are the first two characters that the audience can see clearly in the play, and they are at the trailer serving an eviction notice (6-8). The material conditions make themselves known as the more personal and lived crisis of Johnny, standing to lose his home. The utterance of his middle name performs three very important functions: it connects back to the beginning of the play with the second world war paraphernalia and as such connects Johnny yet in another way to England’s history and
past, but it also serves to highlight that Johnny is a soldier, fighting a battle, and that this battle is thematically established in the first scene. Johnny is illegally squatting and have been for some time, in the forest in his semi-permanent-semi-mobile trailer: “This illegal encampment has passed unchallenged since September 1982” (95). His abode is a frequent gathering spot for kids looking for alcohol or drugs, of which he is a known dealer: “You are a drug dealer, Mr Byron. You deal drugs to minors. We have sworn statements” (97). Johnny never denies dealing drugs or doing illicit business. However, and this is vital, he does take issue with the question whether what he does causes anyone any harm: “You’re right. Kids come here. Half of them are safer here than they are at home. You got nowhere else to go, come on over. The door’s open. You don’t like it, stay away. What the fuck do you think an English forest is for?” (98). This is an echo of what he tells Wesley, the local publican who derides him for having kids over, despite that Wesley serves drinks to fourteen-year-olds (42). Byron’s defense is that what he is doing is providing an alternative shelter for wayward kids, who really are just vulnerable and susceptible to the violence of their ordinary lives.

However, whatever harm that Johnny does is augmented by his very existence in an indirect way. This harm is vocalized by Davey in a discussion on concerns of the New Estate tenants:

They’ve got a point, though, haven’t they? I’m not being funny, right, but if you’re sat in your brand-new house you’ve sweat your bollocks off to buy, and find out four hundred yards away there’s some ogre living in a wood… I bet it never said in the brochure: ‘Detached house, three beds with garden overlooking wood with free troll. Free ogre who loves trance music, deals cheap spliff and whizz, don’t pay no tax, and has probably got AIDS. Guaranteed non-stop aggravation and danger.’ I bet that weren’t in the brochure (Butterworth, 30)
That this remark hits home is emphasized by the fact that no one speaks against it. What Davey does is to put Johnny’s existence and presence into a capitalist-rationalist worldview, within which he does cause economic harm by devaluing property just by being in the vicinity of the properties. According to the logic of the capitalist-rationalist society, it is in the people’s interests to remove the presence of such a harm. As the audience learns later, the complaints are not limited to the tenants of the New Estate, but rather 80% of the population of Flintock is behind the complaint against him (96). As White puts it: “Ultimately, their dislike is rooted in an unconscious and unmitigated adherence to the rationalist capitalist view of the land as a resource to be organised for the benefit of humankind. This benefit is almost always measured in functional or economic terms” (269). White further ties the capitalist-rationalist view together with “bureaucratised stories about the spaces around us” (270), implying how important the bureaucratic machinery has become in order to obscure the hegemony of capitalist ideology and its abstractions are given free reign and endows a particular kind of rationality to the violent expulsion of Johnny. As Boll made apparent, however, the status of taboo, should have rendered Rooster Byron sacred and out of reach for the bureaucratically motivated ritual sacrifice on the edifice of “[m]onetary and utilitarian value” (White, 270).

Rather than referring to the capitalist doctrine outright, this essay understands the rationality to adhere to the traces of Thatcherism, which, as relevant to this essay, Evans explains that “[t]hough the role of the government is minimised, the state should staunchly defend individual property rights” (Evans, 2). Because of the minimalized state, the transformation into bureaucratic procedures of this defense performs the act of regulating human behavior, where there is no personal rulership (Arendt, 40, 45). As such, Linda Fawcett represents the bureaucratized government in the play, where no one is personally responsible, accentuated by the initial scene: “Under section 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, supported by Order 24, the County Court ruling
which was heard in Salisbury County Court on 12th March – “(8), and the entity of government is accountable only to the will of the people, accentuated by Fawcett’s second appearance in the play mentioned above. Prosaically, the transgression, if there is one, consists in governmental bureaucracy being utilized to invade individual liberty for the sake of public opinion. This last sentence returns the discussion to Mill.

With the substitution of “the people of custom” for public opinion, it echoes Mill’s introductory remark remarkably close. Mill opines against this kind of governmental intervention and sketches an account of individual liberty which sets limits on the rights of the state to act against individuals. Mill’s account begins in his mode of arguing from utility: “As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that the worth of different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others” (56). This suggests that people are happiest and provide the most to individual and social progress when they are left to live according to their own choosing, and that the majority who create and uphold ways and trends of mainstream society cannot understand either the rationality or the benefit of deviation from the norms that they themselves enforce. Rather, the spontaneity springing from the individual will is understood as troublesome or rebellious (56). Mill phrases what is at stake in the statement that human beings who habitually refer themselves to custom eventually find that “their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own” (60). Conversely, the argument becomes that individuality (i.e., allowing people to live according to their character) is the only way for human beings to become well-developed and be the best they can be (62-63). Mill is aware that this argument is not convincing but continues with the notion that it is useful to let people deviate from the norm for a variety of different reasons. Mill’s first reason is that such people can serve as examples which could be useful to learn from, and
occasionally also produce good things which did not exist before. Further, they perform a service to others by their alternative way of life, in that this forces the norm and foundations for the norm to be readily available and explainable, instead of obfuscated by tradition (63).

Mill moves on to examine the concept of genius, e.g., people capable of contributing greatly to humankind, and argues that, in order for them to be able to develop according to their nature of genius, there must be “an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini, more* individual than any other people—less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character” (64, italics in original). Further, he claims that unless one assumes that there are no more good things to be discovered, then one must allow for originality, which requires genius (64). Mill moves on to discuss the problems that appear when individuals form a mass and warns that “those whose opinion go by the name of public opinion, are not always the same sort of public: in America they are the whole of the white population; in England, chiefly the middle class” (65). This is a warning that the rule of public opinion through bureaucratic means can oppress large parts of the population by virtue of the way that people in positions of power normalize and reinforce what kind of public that is to stand in for the idealized exemplar guiding what understanding of the public opinion is in question. This echoes the concerns raised in the section on theory in the present essay. Mill claims that in a society completely governed by a mass, as is the case when it is governed through the oppressive enforcement of public opinion, then “the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric” (66). Summarily, upholding an alternative to the oppressive normative force of “the tyranny of opinion” enriches society simply by virtue of existing. In this sense,
Johnny’s existence is vindicated as a good, rather than an evil, precisely because of his “in-yer-face” alterity.

In the same vein Mill concludes his utilitarian argumentation, and returns to the individual with a question built on metaphor: it is not the case that people’s feet are sufficiently the same that one kind of shoe fits all, so why should people be more alike in spirit than in feet? He concludes that what is beneficial to the personal development of one person might be detrimental to another, and as such, human beings need to allow for diversity in a vibrant and healthy society (66-67). The point to be made here, is that Johnny faces the audience as an embodiment of “the spirit of liberty”, in perpetual antagonism to the “despotism of custom” (69). However, Mill is aware of the untenability of the argumentation from the perspective of a population where the feature of eccentricity has been extinguished:

unless the intelligent part of the public can be made to feel its value—to see that it is good there should be differences, even though not for the better, even though, as it may appear to them, some should be for the worse. If the claims of Individuality are ever to be asserted, the time is now, while much is still wanting to complete the enforced assimilation. It is only in the earlier stages that any stand can be successfully made against the encroachment. […] If resistance waits till life is reduced nearly to one uniform type, all deviations from that type will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous and contrary to nature. Mankind speedily becomes unable to conceive diversity, when they have been for some time unaccustomed to see it. (Mill, 72, my italics)

Mill is here quoted at length in order to, again, emphasize the urgency with which he considered the issue. A reader will remember that he wrote roughly 150 years ago. While it must be conceded that society is necessarily more multi-cultural and globalist today than it was in Mill’s day, it can also be argued that the process underlying Mill’s
worry has continued further today, as emphasized by the brief on theory above. Another account would be that of Arendt’s description of the emergence of the social sphere where the private concerns of the life process become the overarching public concern and everything public is an enlarged sphere within which to carry out the private concerns of individual citizens (38-40): "It is decisive that […] society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (40). More contemporary phenomena could be mentioned, such as the normative tendency in social media where ‘liking’ the post of another explicitly bestows public approval or influencers telling people how to behave in order to be ‘successful’. Finally, one could consider the existence of cancel culture, where a person is shunned for the reason that they express opinions which are considered unacceptable, express them in words which are considered inacceptable, associate with the wrong people, or even mention them. In Mill’s terms it could be phrased as follows: There has been an increase in the number of molds in which to fit one’s character into, but each of these have an increased normative force. That humankind has come so far in the process of normative enforcement of behavior in society is what brings the discussion to the final scene in the play, and the final point to be made in this essay.

Even so, it must first be prefaced by the unresolved question whether Johnny constitutes a harm. Mill reminds us that the harm that people cause society by virtue of them going against the grain of common behavior, even when it is an obvious eyesore, it is “for the sake of the greater good of human freedom” (80). It is in this sense that it is tempting to understand Johnny as the protagonist, the good guy, that he is showing himself to be noble and pure, upholding the old ideals of English eccentricity, and that when he is beaten and branded by Troy and his friends (Butterworth 104) Troy is understood as the antagonist. This is increasingly tempting when considering Troy’s
callous treatment of the children that hang around Johnny: “Just open your cockhole one more time, I’ll shut it for good. Shut the fuck up. You wanna say more? Little bitch. Little cocksucker” (80). The story being told is not so simple, however: while it is true that Troy is the antagonist according to the narrative structure, just as Johnny is the protagonist, Troy is, symbolically and prosaically, the paragon of the public (and public opinion)—The heroic figure who dares face off with the dragon in the woods. In a real and terrible sense, then, Troy is Saint George come to rescue his stepdaughter Phaedra, who is kept hidden in Johnny’s trailer throughout the play (84, 100-104). Troy is a person who fits in with the society, in the mundane fact that he is an ordinary man, who works and protects his family from external harm. However, Johnny insinuates that Troy himself is as much risk of sexual abuse for Phaedra as anyone else: “I understand, mate. You’re just worried. It’s not just you feel a little bit randy today. […] Bet it’s hard to sleep with her right next door. She in your dreams, boy? She in your dreams?” (81). Instead of allowing the whole argument to go around again, Troy puts a stop to it with violence. In important ways then, especially suggested by the blood-red mirror scene mentioned above, Troy is Johnny’s mirror-image, and as the paragon of the public, Troy symbolically becomes the embodiment of society and custom, and Johnny the other side of the coin.

That someone is going to be accused of rape was always suggested by Phaedra’s name evoking the classical versions of the Phaedra myths. Of course, in Jerusalem, it is a question of statutory rape, and it is not Phaedra herself who points a finger, but two men accusing one another of having those proclivities. This question is left to the interpreter to settle, and unfortunately scholarly interpretation has run along the traditional logic of the narrative. Johnny becomes the hero and protector of Phaedra, and much support is sought in his exchange with her: “I don’t expect nothing from you, fairy” (102). It is on this point that scholarly interpretation generally runs into the mistake of allowing the protagonist to be redeemed and made wholly good. This is
precisely the problem with Edwards’ interpretation in her work: while the coherence of her interpretation is left intact (Jerusalem offers no forward-looking account of Englishness applicable to the present), it is not the case that Jerusalem holds up England’s past and past ideals of Englishness as a solution. Were it the case that Johnny is redeemed, Edwards would be correct. He is the great inheritor of old English eccentricity, of tradition, of history, waging a war against the new, the impersonal, the bureaucratic, the modern world, but he is also a deeply problematic figure.

It is the case that he is a criminal, and as a criminal, society has a right and a responsibility to defend itself, as Mill concedes (92-97). The facts are that Johnny is dealing drugs to minors, commits other crimes, is prone to acts of violence, lies constantly, and takes pleasure where he can. As Carney remarks, Johnny “articulates these [positive English] values by pissing on them, and that this piss constitutes a sacrament” (293). Despite the fact that he is harboring Phaedra in his trailer, and for all his speech and the suggestions in the play that he is really her protector, he is not a trustworthy character, and in that sense, he cannot be trusted with the safety of children. Further, while one might not be inclined to suspect him of abusing his position for sexual relations with Phaedra, it is deeply problematic that he is in a position to do so. In that sense, society must punish him. Like the professor waking up from his trip and his trauma (Butterworth 98-99), it is time to return to reality, just as the end of the carnivalesque is signaled by the church bells at the start of act three (85).

In all this prosaic reality of the consequences of events and choices, and all theory laid aside, Johnny is harmful to society and must be dealt with accordingly. The very problem is that, because of the ritualized bureaucratic exorcism of him, on the basis of public opinion with capitalist-rationalist Thatcherite logic, which Mill shows impoverishes society and forces it into stagnation, the expulsion of Johnny remains a transgression. It is here that the myth and the symbolism return, and he becomes that which cannot be sacrificed. It is here that Johnny makes one last act of defiance, where
he calls the giants: “Relentlessly he beats the drum. Faster. Faster. Staring out. He pounds on and on until the final blow rings out and… / Blackout. / Curtain. / The End” (109). The ending is an ellipsis, because the play ends with a strong invocation of the myth and magic that the play has been teasing out. While the play ends, the audience might well believe that giants will answer the summons. In fact, in Rickson’s production of the play, the drum was answered by the sound of a giants’ footfall (Rabey 129). However, the play does more than console the audience with myth and the familiarity of a venerable past. It is a play which “asks questions about the survival, the resilience of idiosyncrasy, eccentricity and individualism – not individualism in the Thatcherite sense of everybody out for themselves but the individual as a force of nature refusing to conform to a puritan work ethic or aspirational lifestyle measured in home ownership and material possessions” (Holdsworth 185). In order to do that, it ends precisely in another beginning—in a call to action. With the church bells calling the audience back to reality, there are no giants of myth that will come to aid the spirit of liberty, imperfectly embodied in the problematic flesh of Johnny. The ending is not a suggestion of rescuing the past and safeguard the ideal in the present. The past has been shown to be mixed in with the problematic as it is, scattered with the trash among Johnny’s trailer, and, especially since it is tied up in a character who simply cannot be trusted, it sends a signal that there is no solace to be found in looking back. However, “by refusing to bend the knee” (Mill), Byron, in his final act of defiance, shows the tyranny of custom that he is “just not having it” (Harding). It is a reversal and a refusal of the bureaucratic/ritual sacrifice, and through his act of defiance and self-sacrifice he, like Achilles7, is in the unique position to choose his identity and determine the greatness of his act (Arendt 193). His act shows that while the past might not be saved, it is possible to preserve the principle of liberty in the individual act. The act calls the

7 “[W]hoever consciously aims at being “essential,” at leaving behind a story and an identity which will win “immortal fame” must not only risk his life but expressly choose, as Achilles did, a short life and premature death” (Arendt 193)
audience to action for liberty and freedom in the contemporary world, against the
despotism of custom. The giants to be woken from slumber are each and every member
of humankind, and the play is the drum summoning each of us to respond. It returns the
play to the beginning and its Blakean revolutionary spirit, for while the second half of
the hymn does not appear in the play, in a very tangible sense, the play stands in for the
second half. The readers and the audience are called on to act and to make the vow:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England’s green & pleasant Land.

4. Conclusion

In Jez Butterworths Jerusalem the body of Johnny Rooster Byron is the site of a
gathering of numerous conflicts. Of central interest to the present essay is the
conflicting identity of a defiant individualist, who goes his own way, against the grain
of society and that of a failed father, incapable of leading a life in accordance with the
laws and norms of society and consequently (self-)banishment to the woods. On the
surface, this conflict is presented as Johnny’s eviction from his trailer, and initially
phrased in terms of the suggestively named “New Estate” gobbling up what little space
is left for people to live in liberty and according to their own eccentricities, such as
Johnny does. The capitalist-rationalist Thatcherite logic which drives the ever-
expanding New Estate(s) suggests a more developed picture, where the public opinion,
which is what really drives the eviction, is fueled precisely by such a logic where the
home-owners’ self-interest becomes synonymous with “economic and functional”
concerns. In a cultural materialist reading of the play with Mill’s On Liberty as intertext
it is revealed that in many ways the court of public opinion is oppressive enough to lead
society into a stagnant state, which cannot see the value of alterity or individuality.
The action takes place on St. George’s day, and as such the carnivalesque disregard of rules of reality are expected. Through saturating the play with mythic and symbolic images Butterworth creates a landscape in which the prosaic is endowed with the poetic, as can be seen when the mythical and magical descriptions return in the transgression of the highly ritualized bureaucratic machinations of evictions which both begin and end the action of the play. The problem is that Johnny, a human being quite incapable of living in reality, must rely on the mythical for protection against the transgressions of a society ridding itself of a harm—only constituting itself as a harm according to the particular logic mentioned above. However, given that the bell has tolled for prosaic reality to assert itself, the audience cannot afford to wait for giants to come to the aid of Johnny, they must themselves act in accordance with Johnny’s act of defiance when he faces the bulldozers coming to tear his home apart. It is a call for help from a human being who needs it, and while no one can allow him to live in the forest dealing drugs and endangering children, he does have a right to exist and to be protected. While the old and problematic aspects of England’s history, myth, and self-conception are embodied in Johnny, it must be allowed to perish—the past must be allowed to be dead and gone. The past, precisely because it is past, is politically relevant in the present because it both demands and promises action. In terms of Englishness, this is not a play which suggests easy solutions by redeeming past ideals, but rather asks the more precarious question of what principles should be foundational going forward.

In the present analysis, one of those principles suggested is that of the principle of liberty: in Johnny, his very incapacity to be other than he is calls people to act on his behalf, on the behalf of liberty, and on the behalf of the right to be the individual one is and none other. It is in these terms that Jerusalem suggests the urgency that we—all human beings—act with the spirit of liberty as a guiding principle.
Works Cited


