

Introduction

Byron hated an author who was ‘all author’ and he himself was anything but that. He has been a public figure whose private life has been the subject of intense interest since the publication of *Childe Harold Cantos* I and II made him ‘famous overnight’. He continues to be the subject not only of scholarly biographical interest but of popular films and television documentaries. To politicians, his political views remain of intense interest, while his sexual mores not only continue to be analysed but have been appropriated by various interest groups to serve their own ends. He is a cultural villain, an anti-hero, and a hero pure and simple. He has the status of a national hero in Greece because of his participation in the Greek War of Independence, and he is also a cultural hero in places as far apart as Russia and Japan. So we have sought in this *Companion* to place him first of all in the context of the narratives surrounding his own life, and then in the particular circumstances of that life, picking out three obvious areas of particular interest – his relationship to the world of books, to politics, and to sexuality. Only then have we attempted a closer focus on some of Byron’s major works. In an output as large as that of Byron his poetical works alone fill some seven volumes. We do not attempt to be comprehensive in this section, but many texts not picked up here are referred to in the other two sections of the volume. Once some familiarity with the issues of the works, including Byron’s very considerable contribution to English prose, has been achieved, we have moved on to broader literary and cultural contexts and focused there on Byron’s ambivalent relationship to Shakespeare, his massive impact on European literature, and the strange way in which he can be seen in the light either of his attachment to the socially centred poetry of the eighteenth century, or of his prefiguring of postmodernism.

Taken as a whole, the *Companion* should provide a good overview of what one can only call the Byron phenomenon, a phenomenon that has cultural importance not only in the United Kingdom but throughout the world. He is arguably still the most read English author after Shakespeare.

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But as well as providing an overview, we have also tried to present the state of Byron studies as they are at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and to avoid mere introductory paraphrase of previous views. It is quite possible therefore to dip into the Companion and, we certainly hope, to find something interestingly new.

Thus in the first group of essays, Paul Douglass, in his chapter on Byron's biography, has dealt with the influence which Byron has had on biographical art, as well as simply the fact of the biographies and their changing view of Byron. We hope too that Peter Graham's chapter on how 'Byron's literary career was crucially shaped by the practical contingencies of publishing' reveals that for all his unwillingness to be seen as a professional writer Byron was more willing than most to invest his energies in the practical considerations of authorship. Malcolm Kelsall refocuses the work of his major study of Byron's politics looking at Byron's relationship to British party politics, not always what it might have seemed on the surface. Andrew Elfenbein provides a relatively surprising reaffirmation of how central the sexual agenda has always been to the Byronic image in which he argues that the most shocking aspect of Byron's gender agenda is that 'he dared to make sexuality banal'.

The second group of essays are, as we have said, more textually focused. Philip Martin argues that *Childe Harold* I and II is a profoundly public work written in a style designed to appeal to a new audience sympathetic to its coherent and anti-teleological explorations of history, politics, and contemporary affairs. Nigel Leask has a lot to say about *Childe Harold's* Canto II as well, but angles his discussion specifically towards Greek nationalism and the uneasy question of the relationship between liberty and nationalism, concluding that 'Byron never allowed nationalist idealism to smother sceptical cosmopolitanism'. His first years of exile, 1816 and 1817, are crucial for Byron's development and Alan Rawes focuses closely on the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and on *Manfred*, highlighting the shift away from Byron's 'Sturm und Drang' period towards a more socially centred individualism. This social and political dimension is taken up by Alan Richardson in his study of Byron's dramas which Richardson sees as 'resolutely engaged with political and social issues' of the time. I myself look at the further development of Byron's view of life as an individually generated narrative told in a social context by looking in close focus at *Childe Harold* Canto IV, *Don Juan*, and *Beppo*. Susan Wolfson tracks the same progress in a different way by emphasising that it is perhaps too easy to explain the experience of *The Vision of Judgment* in purely political terms. Particularly given its relationship to the public interest in his life, Byron's prose output might well have made his reputation even had there not been the poetry.

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Andrew Nicholson reads Byron's character through the immense output of his letters and journals and introduces us to the 'generosity' of his prose.

The final section of the Companion tries various other strategies for 'explaining' the Byron phenomenon. Ann Barton focuses on the seriously ambiguous nature of Byron's relationship to Shakespeare whom he mined and in his protean manner in some way resembled, but whom he also pilloried. Bernard Beatty looks at the strange fact that it was when Byron was most obviously in debt to the eighteenth century that he was also most obviously creating textures for the twentieth and twenty-first. Professor McGann's essay on the lyric raises the context of the lyric idea, so important to the period, and to which Byron has a unique relationship. Peter Cochran creates for English readers the necessary sense of scale to appreciate Byron's influence and reputation overseas by looking at France, Germany, Italy, Russia and Poland. During the 1950s and 1960s in particular, it was often fashionable to see Byron as essentially an eighteenth-century poet. In the last essay in the volume, Jane Stabler's piece takes up some of the arguments of Susan Wolfson and myself on the *ottava rima* arguing that while Byron's poetry sometimes seems to flirt with denying 'the possibility of sincerity altogether' it actually invites its readers to 'invest imaginative energy' – an investment for which the poetry promises a profitable return.

Byron was a protean figure and also a protean poet. If this can be called a single theme then this is the theme which emerges from this collection. Significantly for the business of English studies, however, there are essays in this volume which could loosely be called historicist, new historicist, and in some manner or other formalist. It may be that the days of power struggles between conflicting critical ideologies are past, or it may be that Byron's multiple nature, while uncomfortable with any one view, is comfortable with all.

Temperate I am – yet never had a temper;
 Modest I am – yet with some slight assurance;
 Changeable too – yet somehow '*Idem semper*':
 Patient – but not enamoured of endurance;
 Cheerful – but, sometimes, rather apt to whimper:
 Mild – but at times a sort of '*Hercules furens*':
 So that I almost think that the same skin
 For one without – has two or three within.

(*Don Juan*, XVII.11)

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I
HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

I

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Byron's life and his biographers

Introduction

After the mid-nineteenth century, it became a stereotype that asylum inmates imagined themselves as the omnipotent Napoleon – but also the brilliant Byron.¹ Extreme as it seems, this desire for vicarious experience, this tendency to translate one's life into the idealization of another, is common – so common that it led Albert Camus to define biography itself as 'nostalgia for other people's lives'.² Camus notes that our fascination with the careers of the famous stems from our belief that such lives have strong plots, while our own seem fragmentary and directionless. However, since even the careers of celebrities are not as neatly plotted as we could wish, the production of that 'nostalgia' has required an unholy alliance between fiction and biography. Lord Byron knew this as well as perhaps anyone in history. In writing his own story and seeming to live what he wrote, he made it impossible to discuss his work apart from his life. The vignettes and anecdotes he relished and promulgated produced a tale unified around themes of sex, violence, genius, and adventure, or – in the case of hostile biographers – sex, violence, cruelty, and hypocrisy. But in either case, the indivisibility of the life and work explains much of the delight and frustration to be found in the immense canon of Byron Biography, everything from laurel wreaths to slash-and-burn character assassination, from factual accounts to encounters beyond the grave, such as Quevedo Redivivus's *A Spiritual Interview with Lord Byron* (1840) and Amanda Prantera's *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion, 163 Years after His Lordship's Death* (1987).

The deepest vein in Byronic portraits is the one that runs along the Gothic. The literary masks of transgressors like Childe Harold, Selim, Lara, Conrad, Manfred, Cain, and Don Juan have inspired scores of writers. Before he died, Byron had appeared as such a character in at least a dozen novels, most notably as the eponymous heroes of Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* (1816) and *Ada Reis* (1823), and the self-dramatizing Mr Cypress in Thomas Love

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Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) – but also in hilariously serious works like Bridget Bluemantle's *The Baron of Falconberg; or, Childe Harolde in Prose* (1815); and *Prodigious!!! or Childe Paddie in London* (1818). Blake's *The Ghost of Abel* employs Byron's character, as does Goethe's *Faust Part 2*. Byron biography has frequently employed the devices of Gothic melodrama. That is not accidental, for Byron encouraged his readers to imagine him as a composite of the heroes of such novels as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, William Beckford's *Vathek*, and Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, all of which he read when he was young. He knew the character he must portray. As he wrote to his former friend at Cambridge, Francis Hodgson, 'the *hero* of tragedy and (I add meo periculo) a *tragic* poem must be *guilty*, to *excite* "terror and pity"'. And, he asked blithely, 'Who is the hero of "Paradise Lost"? Why Satan' (*BLJ*, VIII, 115). If Byron's biographers have been drawn to Gothic elements in his life, that is because Byron helped them along, portraying himself as a fallen angel who was able to dash off a brilliant poem in minutes but was haunted by a secret past.

That image was born in 1812 when, at the age of twenty-four, he published what everyone took to be a thinly disguised autobiography titled *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. His own hero had been Napoleon, whose bust he kept upon his desk at Harrow, and his goal was to establish himself as a conquering force in letters: *Harold* was his first major victory. Byron was strongly identified with the protagonist of his work, and the poem made him an object of personal fascination. The Gothic–Satanic elements of his story have proven to be perennially mesmerizing – his lame foot, imperious (and painfully crass) mother, prodigious swimming ability, sexual ambivalence, incestuous attraction to his half-sister, illegitimate children, widely publicized separation from his wife, exile from England, effortless writing talent, friendships with the famous, and death while promoting the Greek independence movement in 1824. This irresistible material has made a mountain of biographical writing, including over 200 substantial biographies, dozens of memoirs, countless pamphlets and biographical essays, and innumerable fictional treatments in novels, poems, plays, and operas.

Prodigious as it is, and prompt as it was to pursue Byron after his death in 1824, biography still arrived late. Byron had already been telling his own story for years, engaging others in a creative process of living through him and his fictional personae. At thirty-three, less than two-and-a-half years before his death in Greece, Byron ruminated on his own growing legend:

I have seen myself compared personally or poetically – in English French German (as interpreted to me) Italian and Portuguese within these nine years – to Rousseau – Goethe – Young – Aretine – Timon of Athens – 'An Alabaster Vase

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lighted up within', Satan – Shakespeare – Buonaparte – Tiberius – Aeschylus – Sophocles – Euripides – Harlequin – The Clown – Sternhold and Hopkins – to the Phantasmagoria – to Henry the 8th, to Chenier – to Mirabeau – to young R[obert] Dallas (the Schoolboy) to Michael Angelo – to Raphael – to a petit maitre – to Diogenes, to Childe Harold – to Lara – to the Count in Beppo – to Milton – to Pope – to Dryden – to Burns – to Savage – to Chatterton – to 'oft have I heard of thee my Lord Biron' in Shakespeare [*Love's Labour's Lost*, v.2.921], to Churchill the poet – to Kean the Actor – to Alfieri &c. &c. &c.

...

The object of so many contradictory comparisons must probably be like something different from them all, – but what that is, is more than I know, or any body else. (BLJ, IX, 11)

Rankled by the comparison to Rousseau, he was intrigued by others, especially to Alexander Pope, whose wit and physical infirmity had stirred Byron's nascent imagination when he was merely a boy with a bad foot. Better to 'err with Pope' (*English Bards*, 102) than to shine with another choice. He was all too aware of becoming a legend – of the inevitability of those comparisons to Napoleon and Satan, for example – and yet he conveys a bemused sense of joining the spectators peering at this curious object. Indeed, Byron left a remarkable record of dispassionate self-evaluation that has generally been validated by his greatest biographer to date, Leslie Marchand, and corroborated in the hundreds of letters Marchand edited and published between 1973 and 1994. Thus, although Byron used the tools of fiction to create illusions about himself as an author and a man, he also recorded his life in fact, believing it would be important to posterity. He strongly felt he was creating a life to be read, now and in future years. It is in this sense that we may see Byron as attempting to write his own biography.

The life

Byron's childhood was not easy. He was born in London on 22 January 1788, to a first-time mother and a father who shortly abandoned child and wife. Captain John Byron, nicknamed 'Mad Jack', was the son of a vice-admiral, and he had been married before, to a woman with a lifetime guaranteed income of £4,000 per annum. When she died, leaving him to care for a daughter named Augusta, Jack looked for another heiress, and he found her in Catherine Gordon of Gight. She was an impetuous woman who had, by all accounts, few prepossessing characteristics beyond the income of her estate, which rapidly disappeared after marriage to the captain. Pursued by debtors and wounded emotionally by her son's deformed foot, she retreated to her ancestral Scotland where she and the child lived in Aberdeen. There Byron

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received a book education at the Grammar School and a sexual initiation at the hands of his nurse, May Gray, neither of which would ever fade from memory. His father died in 1791 – perhaps by his own hand – bequeathing nothing but debts.

In 1794, Byron became the heir to the barony held by his profligate great-uncle, to which he acceded as the sixth baron upon the Wicked Lord's death in 1798. Though the family seat, Newstead Abbey, still had to be rented out, Byron's prospects had improved, and his sense of entitlement increased astronomically. He moved to England and attended school at Dulwich and Harrow. During his Harrow years, he formed the first of his many 'attachments' to females, including Elizabeth Pigot, Margaret Parker (his cousin), and Mary Chaworth, the last of whom inspired pain and poetry. Harrow was unappealing to him at first, but toward the end of his time there he found his stride. He played cricket avidly and met the Earl of Clare, a friend for life. He also began corresponding with his half-sister, Augusta. At this time he had a shocking encounter with Lord Grey de Ruthyn, the leaseholder for Newstead Abbey. Most likely, de Ruthyn invited Byron to participate in his own homosexual initiation. The ruins at Newstead never looked the same to him. They came to symbolize only 'the wreck of the [family] line' ('Newstead Abbey', 24). At Cambridge, by virtue of his peerage, he suffered no examinations or other scholarly indignities. He became a legendary student from the privileged class, keeping a pet bear, drinking, betting on the horses and the fights. It was a wild life, memorialized in 'Hints from Horace' (1811):

Fines, tutors, tasks, conventions threat in vain,
 Before hounds, hunters, and Newmarket plain.
 Rough with his elders, with his equals rash,
 Civil to sharpers, prodigal of cash,
 Constant to nought – save hazard and a whore,
 Yet cursing both, for both have made him sore.

('Hints from Horace', 229–34)

But in addition to excess there was abstemiousness. At one point, he appears to have dieted off fifty-one pounds over a period of five months. He formed several close relationships here, as well, including those with John Cam Hobhouse, Charles Matthews, and with a young chorister named John Edleston, who inspired several beautiful poems dedicated to a sexually ambiguous figure named 'Thyrza'. He wrote more earnestly than he studied, and published by private means four books of poetry: *Fugitive Pieces* (1806), *Poems on Various Occasions* (1807), *Hours of Idleness* (1807), and *Poems*

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Original and Translated (1808). *Hours of Idleness* received a stinging dismissal in the *Edinburgh Review*, a quarterly which was the mouthpiece for Whig literary and political criticism. Two years later, Byron turned twenty-one and entered the House of Lords. He also finished at Cambridge and retorted to his critics with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). He looked forward now to crossing Europe with his friend Hobhouse, cavalierly ignoring the Napoleonic wars.

Travelling through Portugal and Spain to Greece, Albania and Turkey was a mind-expanding experience that brought many adventures, including the swimming of the Hellespont, an achievement of which Byron was rightly proud. He experimented with everything, including homo- and heterosexual partners, and visited the tyrannical ruler of Albania, Ali Pasha. He began to write *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, composing it in 'Spenserian stanzas', the nine-line stanza adapted by Edmund Spenser for his masterwork, *The Faerie Queene*.³ After his return to England, he learned that his mother had died almost simultaneously with his arrival, and immediately thereafter he was informed of the deaths of his Cambridge friends, Matthews and Edleston. This sequence of events apparently made Byron feel his life was running away with him – that he was living at a faster rate than a normal human being.

The day after the publication of the two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in March 1812, Byron 'awoke one morning and found himself famous' as he described it to Thomas Moore.⁴ In *Childe Harold*, Byron had invented a special kind of hero, behind whose mask he easily slipped. Sought after by a growing public, he was perceived as having an infectious charisma that his future bride described as 'the Byromania'. Miss Anna Isabella (or 'Annabella') Milbanke observed the sycophancy of her female contemporaries and wrote: 'Reforming Byron with his magic sway / Compels all hearts to love him and obey.'⁵ Byron was, in fact, the prototypical celebrity, and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* produced a fan base for Byron among female readers. Lady Caroline Lamb is the most famous of those who wrote to 'Harold' offering him solace for the murky sorrows and shadowy demons haunting his pallid features. They carried on an intense and very public affair over that summer, until finally her family was forced to send her to Ireland. She returned that autumn, gaunt and deranged, and never entirely got over the experience. But it was not just Byron's sexual power that had made such an impression; it was also his writing. Lady Caroline was inspired to write three novels and a number of poems as she tried to work out what had happened to her. In this regard, she was not atypical of Byron's female readership, who fantasized about becoming Byron as much as about possessing him.

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In Childe Harold, Byron had invented a character who was an astonishing amalgam of the Aristotelian tragic hero and other heroic elements, as Peter Thorslev shows in his seminal study, *The Byronic Hero* (1962). But Harold was also a character he would outgrow. Like modern celebrities, Byron confronted the paradox that his audience loved him not for himself, but for what they imagined him to be. James Soderholm, who has detailed ways in which Byron's female interlocutors – whether lovers or friends – contributed to his work by enlightening him about their responses to him and his writing, cites this passage from the fifteenth canto of *Don Juan*:

with women he was what
 They pleased to make or take him for; and their
 Imagination's quite enough for that:
 So that the outline's tolerably fair,
 They fill the canvas up – and '*Verbum sat*'.
 If once their phantasies be brought to bear
 Upon an object, whether sad or playful,
 They can transfigure brighter than a Raphael.

(*Don Juan*, xv.16.1–8)

Byron knew that readers were meeting him half-way – and more.⁶ Awareness of the power of the audience made him more anxious to present himself – in person, in portraits, and in print – as a man of action and not a foppish poet. He had himself painted in various military get-ups, and popularized a rugged, open-shirted look. Like celebrities of two centuries later, he was obsessed with his weight and carefully prepared for public appearances. He practised a special gloomy, smouldering glance he called his 'under-look' that simply devastated his public.

A student of stagecraft, he created characters who paralleled his personality and circumstances so closely that it is still impossible to avoid asking, in the words of Peter Cochran, 'Is this then verse, or documentation? Poetry, or journalism? Art, or life?'⁷ In embracing this contradiction, Byron speaks to our time. Again and again, biography stumbles back to the cold truth that almost anything it may say of Byron he has already said of himself – in his jottings, poetry, or letters. He found himself protean; so do we. He found himself mad (and maddening), brilliant and perverse, magnanimous and competitive, egotistic and idealistic, homosexual and heterosexual, domineering and acquiescent, and a host of other contradictory things – and so do we. Byron described himself in language so memorable that all one can do is quote it: 'My muse admires digression' ('To the Earl of Clare', 72).