

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings
of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Prawer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I
THE VIEW FROM GERMANY
1797–1831

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Praver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

'SIR HARRY'

i

Among the English 'Harry' is the name familiarly given to all whose name is Henry, and it corresponds exactly to the German name, Heinrich, which I received at my baptism . . . My father anglicized my name . . . in order to honour one of the best friends he had in England. 'Mr Harry' looked after my father's business interests in Liverpool; he knew which factories produced the best 'velveteen' there, and this article of commerce was particularly dear to my father's heart . . . 'Velveteen' was his favourite toy, and he was happy when the great carts carrying this freight were unloaded, and all the Jewish businessmen of the neighbourhood crammed into our corridor while the unpacking was going on; for those were his best customers. They not only bought his velveteen in large quantities, but they also showed that they appreciated its quality. Since you, dear reader, may not know what 'velveteen' is, I permit myself an explanation: this English word denotes a fabric made from cotton, but with the appearance and surface feel of velvet. Very good trousers, waistcoats and jackets can be manufactured from it. The material is also called 'Manchester cloth', after the industrial city where it was first produced in quantity.

Since the friend who was most expert at buying velveteen for resale bore the name Harry, I too received this name – and that is what I was called within the family and among our friends and neighbours.

This quotation from Heine's fragmentary *Memoirs (Memoiren)*, written in the last years of his life, shows that his very name, chosen as a European equivalent to his Hebrew name 'Khayim', placed him within an English orbit; and that, moreover, his earliest days were spent in a household which depended for a good deal of its income on trade with Liverpool and Manchester. The editors of Volume XV in the critical Düsseldorf edition of Heine's works have recently dug out an advertisement Samson Heine inserted in a local newspaper on 5 December 1809:

In response to persistent enquiries whether the goods I have ordered from England have arrived, I hereby notify my friends and patrons that they are

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Prawer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The view from Germany: 1797–1831*

indeed to hand. They comprise all manner of cloth manufactured in England; I personally purchased these goods during my recent visit to England, with an eye to the latest trends of fashion. – By means of reasonable prices I shall seek to deserve the confidence of those who have hitherto favoured me with their custom. S. Heine

This document suggests that Heine's father visited England while his son was between eleven and twelve years old, and leaves us free to surmise that he will have told his son something of his experiences there.

Very soon afterwards, however, trade with Liverpool and Manchester was fatally disrupted by Napoleon's Continental blockade, and Samson Heine found himself unable to supply his customers with the English goods on which his business depended so heavily. This hastened the breakdown of his (never very robust) health, and propelled him inevitably towards bankruptcy and financial dependence on his wealthy brother Salomon. As for the name 'Harry', with which he had impressed his English business relationships on his son, this soon became a source of humiliation. To the ears of Harry's schoolfellows it sounded like the call of a Düsseldorf dustman to his donkey – 'HAARÜH!' – and it was constantly used to tease and torment him. In later years the bearer of that name became known to the world as 'Heinrich' or 'Henri'; but he always remained 'Harry' to his family.

The fragment of Heine's *Memoirs* records yet another connection with England. His father had been, for a time, a supplier to Prince Ernest of Cumberland, whose very title points to the connection between the House of Hanover (to which Prince Ernest belonged) and the British Crown. This temporary link with the Hanoverians had left, if we can believe Heine's fond recollections, a lasting legacy in his father's mode of speaking. His father, Heine tells us, differed from the Rhinelanders all about him not (as one might have supposed) because he spoke a Jewish German, but because he had acquired a Hanoverian mode of speech which sounded to his son's ears a better and purer German than any to be heard in the Rhineland. The poet later acquired a Hanoverian connection of his own: he matriculated at the University of Göttingen, whose Rector (as Heine pointed out with glee) doubled as King of England.

The *Memoirs* speak of hopes, cherished by Harry's mother, that her son might one day become a merchant and financier whose flair and fame would equal that of the Rothschilds; and these hopes, he tells us, necessitated the study of the English language at a local

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Praver

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Sir Harry'*

commercial academy. When Heine demonstrated all too clearly that such talents as he had were not those of a trader or banker, England entered the picture again; for his mother observed that in the island on the other side of the Channel the *legal* profession had achieved great standing and great power – not least through parliament, where the lawyers' training in making a case and in persuasive speaking had assured them high offices of state. The same thing, she thought, was true of France and would be increasingly true of Germany, too. She therefore arranged that her son, with financial help from his wealthy uncle Salomon Heine, who had already presided over his nephew's failed career as a merchant-prince, would study law at a German university. Heine did just that, in fact, at Bonn, Göttingen and Berlin; but though he obtained his doctorate, he never became either a practising lawyer or a statesman.

The curriculum of the secondary school Heine attended in Düsseldorf laid greater stress on French culture than on English; he read some English books in translation (notably *Gulliver's Travels*) but it was only when he entered the Vahrenkamp Commercial Academy in October 1813 that he could begin to make out English originals. The records of the Düsseldorf library (*Landesbibliothek*) show that he borrowed English grammars by L. Murray and W. Thompson, as well as some volumes of Shakespeare and the works of Edmund Waller. This intellectual and spiritual commerce with Britain was supplemented by visits to Hamburg, where the most prosperous branch of the Heine family lived; for this city prided itself on its long-standing English connections. Hamburg food, Heine was later to make his Schnabelewopski say, was heavenly, and Hamburg manners were 'englisch' – a pun on 'Angli' and 'angeli' which goes back to at least the time of Pope Gregory the Great. Just as Heine himself was called 'Harry' within the family, so his cousin Amalie figures in his letters as 'Molly' – an English form already used by the poet Bürger as a name for the beloved woman addressed in his poems. The suitor to whom 'Molly' preferred her cousin called himself *John* Friedländer; his life-style and mode of dress betrayed to Heine's jealous eyes attempts to ape the English gentleman.

In 1819, after Heine had shown his lack of business acumen by following his father into bankruptcy (the firm Uncle Salomon had set up for him, Harry Heine and Co., had been intended to specialize in the sale of English cloth), he began his law-studies in the University of Bonn. Here he soon came within the orbit of a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Prawer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The view from Germany: 1797–1831*

teacher who had no connection with the Faculty of Law: August Wilhelm Schlegel, who had done more than anyone else to make Germans aware of the greatness of Shakespeare. As a scholar and translator, and as a university teacher of literature, Schlegel brought an appreciation of world literature to German audiences that was well in advance of most other countries' awareness of literary treasures beyond their own frontiers. Heine had already published a translation of one of Byron's poems, the famous 'Fare Thee Well', before he met Schlegel; the latter now encouraged him to serve a kind of poetic apprenticeship by translating other poems from English into German, and gave him an interest in metrical questions that was to stay with him for the rest of his life. Heine showed his gratitude to this gifted teacher by writing a sonnet in his praise; later on, however, relations soured, and Heine took malicious pleasure in ridiculing Schlegel and drawing attention to his undoubted human weaknesses.

The young Heine's translations from Byron are, for the most part, spirited prentice work; and as early as 1822, when offering readers of his first collection, *Gedichte*, four such versions as 'samples of the way in which I mean to translate some English poets into German', he disowned his renderings of 'Fare Thee Well' and 'To Inez' as 'immature and faulty'. The longest of these translations, however, the first scene of Byron's *Manfred*, is a virtuoso performance which reproduces the difficult rhyme scheme of the original with apparent ease and with remarkably little sacrifice of the author's meaning. Heine occasionally thought of reprinting this scene in a later collection; in the end, however, none of his Byron translations appeared again in his life-time, nor were they followed by many further translations from the English poets.

The poets the young Heine chose to render into German all show the Byronic hero in characteristic form. In 'Fare Thee Well' he speaks of the wrongs he has suffered where he has loved, and sees himself 'sear'd in heart, and lone, and blighted', shut out from domestic comfort, friendship, and the love of his child. In 'To Inez', Childe Harold presents himself as a latter-day Wandering Jew, and speaks of the 'sullen brow' that reflects the corrosion of joy and youth which inevitably follows knowledge and experience of the hell in man's heart. 'Good Night' is the Childe's farewell to his native shore, 'alone / Upon the wide, wide sea' like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, but not grieving for what he has left behind because he knows that at home in England neither wife nor dog will grieve long at his absence. The first scene of *Manfred* shows the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - *Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine*

S. S. Prawer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Sir Harry'*

Byronic hero in Faustian mood, sated with human knowledge and yearning for contact with a spirit world that consigns him, in the end, to 'the brotherhood of Cain':

From thy false tears I did distil
 An essence which has strength to kill;
 From thy own heart I then did wring
 The black blood in its blackest spring;
 From thy own smile I snatch'd the snake,
 For there it coil'd as in a brake;
 From thy own lip I drew the charm
 Which gave all these their chiefest harm:
 In proving every poison known,
 I found the strongest was thine own.

By thy cold breast and serpent smile,
 By thy unfathom'd gulfs of guile,
 By that most seeming virtuous eye,
 By thy shut soul's hypocrisy;
 By the perfection of thine art
 Which pass'd for human thine own heart;
 By thy delight in others' pain,
 And by thy brotherhood of Cain,
 I call upon thee, and compel
 Thyself to be thy proper Hell!

All these elements, all these constituents of the Byronic hero, will turn up in Heine's works at different times in his life, adapted, transmuted, and assimilated to his own changing circumstances.

There is one celebrated Byronic feature that Heine carried into life as well as into literature: the curl of the lip, the sardonic smile. 'How that pale lip will curl and quiver', Byron said of his Giaour; and his Corsair's 'playfulness of sorrow' 'smiles in bitterness – but still it smiles'. The twitching or curling lip is a hallmark of many of Heine's figures, too: 'suddenly', it is said of the hero of his tragedy, *William Ratcliff*, 'his upper lip twitched in dreadful mockery'; and of a debonair character in *Journey to the Hartz Mountains* (*Die Harzreise*) a naïve girl is said to observe that the twitch of his lip was *not* due to inward prayer. There is ample testimony from contemporaries that Heine's own face frequently assumed the expression here described.

When Heine's version of 'Fare Thee Well' first appeared in the *Gazette for Rhineland-Westphalia* (*Rheinisch-Westfälischer Anzeiger*) on 15 September 1819, it was printed alongside the English original – a parallel printing which the poet accompanied

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Praver

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The view from Germany: 1797–1831*

with an explanatory note that read: 'The English original of the famous poem which is here provided has an advantage over a thousand mutilated ones: it is a faithful copy of Byron's own manuscript.' Where he obtained this 'faithful copy', Heine does not tell us – some editors surmise the good offices of Elise von Hohenhausen, who visited Hamburg in 1819. At this first printing, however, the fifteen lines from Coleridge's 'Christabel' which Byron had prefixed to his poem were left off; these lines were belatedly published in the *Gazette for Rhineland-Westphalia* of 26 April 1820 in Heine's translation, along with an explanatory note:

Lord Byron chose the following verses from Coleridge's 'Christabel' as a motto for his famous 'Fare Thee Well'.

Although they fully express the spirit of the poem, and constitute, as it were, a commentary upon it, German translators of 'Fare Thee Well' have, strangely enough, never mentioned these truly beautiful verses. The correspondent who furnished the translation in No. 74 of the *Gazette* last year [i.e. Heine himself] made the same mistake, which is rectified herewith.

Heine's version of these 'truly beautiful verses' (lines 408–13 and 419–26 of 'Christabel') hardly does them justice – a close examination shows that almost every change in rhythm and meaning is for the worse; it does more than any other to justify Heine's own dismissal of these early efforts as 'immature and faulty'. Nor does his work on a truncated extract lead to further interest in 'Christabel' or in its author. This is in fact the only mention of Coleridge I have been able to find in all Heine's writings – and the name of Wordsworth, as far as I can see, occurs nowhere at all. There can be little doubt that Byron's ridicule of the Lake Poets impeded potential interest in their work all over Europe.

The English version of Byron's poems which Heine is known to have used is the so-called 'Zwickauer Ausgabe', *The Works of the Right Honourable Lord Byron. In five volumes. Zwickau, printed for the brothers Schumann. 1818*; and contemporaries attest that Heine was frequently to be seen, in the early 1820s, with a volume of this edition in his hands. The poet C. D. Grabbe was contemptuous about the implied parallel, referring to Heine as 'that scrap of a Byron'; but comparisons between Heine's writings and Byron's were frequently made by contemporary reviewers without derogatory intention. Contemporaries were prompted to make such comparisons by echoes and reminiscences that range from verbal similarities – as when the phrase 'ekles Wurmgezücht' in an early sonnet recalls 'reptile crew' in *Childe Harold* – to liberal infusions

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine

S. S. Prawer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

'Sir Harry'

of Byronic *Weltschmerz*. After reading one of Heine's early plays, the novelist Willibald Alexis wrote that its author 'is trying, unmistakably, to be a Byron'. To a certain extent Heine played up to all this; it was useful to have one's name linked to that of a poet who fascinated the whole of contemporary Europe. At the same time, however, he was anxious to show that he was more than a mere imitator. One of the ways he did this was to try to meet Byron on his own ground: to write a farewell-poem ('Lebewohl') which could stand comparison with 'Fare Thee Well'; to compose an original fantasia on themes from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ('Wait, wait, wild mariner' – 'Warte, warte, wilder Schiffsmann'); and to give his countrymen a 'Belsazar' that would not be shamed when read together with Byron's 'Vision of Belshazzar'. This 'Vision' was fresh in his mind because the *Gazette for Rhineland-Westphalia* had published, on 3 June 1820, an announcement of a forthcoming new translation of Byron, and had given its readers a specimen: Franz Theremin's version of the 'Vision of Belshazzar' from Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*. Reminiscences of Byron's original may be detected in Heine's poem. The echoing double rhyme ('hand'–'sand' and 'hand'–'wand') that helps to make the climax of Byron's ballad so hypnotic

In that same hour and hall,
The fingers of a hand
Came forth against the wall,
And wrote as if on sand:
The fingers of a man;
A solitary hand
Along the letters ran,
And traced them like a wand

recurs in Heine's terser depiction of the same event:

Und sieh! und sieh! an weisser Wand
Da kam's hervor wie Menschenhand;
Und schrieb und schrieb an weisser Wand
Buchstaben von Feuer, und schrieb, und schwand.

Lo and behold on the white wall
something appeared – like a human hand –
and wrote and wrote upon the white wall
letters of fire – wrote them, and vanished.

Beyond that, however, Heine's debt to Byron is small in his own Belshazzar poem. It owes more to a Hebrew Passover hymn and to a poem by Justinus Kerner – and most of all, of course, to Heine's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - *Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine*

S. S. Praver

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The view from Germany: 1797–1831*

poetic genius, inspired in this instance by the Book of Daniel. His secularization of the Bible story (to the extent of eliminating the prophet Daniel altogether), his importation of a revolutionary twist (by having the blaspheming king killed by his own servants instead of by foreign invaders), and his powerful foregrounding of the 'midnight' motif are Heine's own unmistakable contribution.

In other poems, however, we find allusions to British originals that the reader is meant to recognize. One of the most famous of these is 'The Grenadiers' ('Die Grenadiere'), of which Heine was to say to an English visitor in 1852:

Ah! . . . This was almost the first poem I ever wrote . . . 'Twas in 1814 that I composed it; I was but fifteen then; I remember singing it low to myself one evening in the early summer, on the banks of the Rhine, just when the news had come that the Emperor was to be exiled to Elba. My friend! I have gone through every phasis of modern thought and feeling – I have been Werther, René, Lara, Faust, Mephistopheles . . . but I have never swerved in my faith in the Emperor.

Thus runs the report in the English literary journal *The Critic* (15 April 1852). There can be little doubt, however, that the poem as we now have it was composed well after 1814, probably in 1819 or 1820, though the experience on which it is based belongs to the earlier date. What is echoed here is not Byron's *Lara*, mentioned by Heine in the same breath as works by Goethe and Chateaubriand, but the Scottish ballad 'Edward, Edward', which Herder had introduced to German readers in a famous essay and an even more famous collection of the world's folk-songs. When one of Heine's grenadiers reacts to the news of the defeat of the *Grande Armée* and the Emperor's captivity by expressing his wish to die and to await the Emperor's second coming in his grave, the other reminds him of his duties to wife and children. 'What are wife and child to me', he replies; 'my desires reach far beyond them; let them go beg if they are hungry – my Emperor, my Emperor, is taken captive!' These lines are deliberately modelled on a snatch of dialogue from the Scottish ballad:

And what wul ye leive to your bairns and your wife,
Edward, Edward?
And what wul ye leive to your bairns and your wife,
When ye gang ovir the sea O?
'The warldis room, let them beg thrae life,
Mither, mither,
The warldis room, let them beg thrae life,
For them nevir mair wul I see O.'

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11062-4 - *Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine*

S. S. Prawer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Sir Harry'*

We shall see Heine introducing Herder's version of this ballad into his play *William Ratcliff*.

In Bonn, Heine acquired his lifelong habit of reading English literary journals; and when he left Bonn in October 1820 to continue his studies at Göttingen, he once again found himself in an Anglophile orbit. Because of Hanover's British connections British journals were kept there as a matter of course – having studied the *Monthly Review* in the Bonn University Library, he now consulted the *Edinburgh Review* in the library of his new *alma mater*, where he also borrowed volumes of Shakespeare, Macpherson's *Ossian* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He continued reading Byron, too – during a temporary absence from Göttingen he asked a friend to send him Byron's *Manfred* as well as another, unnamed, English book (to H. Straub, 5 February 1821). Echoes in his blank-verse plays attest his reading of Shakespeare; Gibbon's voice will be heard in the background when Heine speaks of survivals of classical Rome in modern Italy, and in some of his less respectful remarks about Christianity; and the *Edinburgh Review* contained articles which nourished an interest in India and Sanscrit aroused in Germany by the work of Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel.

In March 1821 Heine migrated for a short while to the University of Berlin; and here, in the capital of the Kingdom of Prussia, he found his 'Byronic' reputation unexpectedly useful – notably because it admitted him to the salon of Byron's German translator Elise von Hohenhausen. Few reviewers of his first volume of poems (*Gedichte*, 1822) missed the chance to compare Heine with Byron – notably in respect of a divided self, of consciousness that the world of the day was an unpropitious one for poets, and of a hostility to philistinism that made the poet resent the public for whom he had to write. Later critics were to notice that one of the 'Dream Pictures' ('Traumbilder') which opened the 1822 collection had a striking structural affinity with Robert Burns's 'The Jolly Beggars' – but this may be purely fortuitous, for we have no other evidence that Heine was familiar with Burns's poems at this early date. The British author who fascinated Heine in the early 1820s and stimulated him to emulation was not Burns, but Byron.

ii

The name of Friedrich Steinmann is not one to conjure with among Heine-scholars; for Steinmann published letters that Heine had