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Edited by A. Hamilton Thompson
Excerpt
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CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE

A ROMAUNT

L'UNIVERS est une espèce de livre, dont on n'a lu que la première page quand on n'a vu que son pays. J'en ai feuilleté un assez grand nombre, que j'ai trouvé également mauvaises. Cet examen ne m'a point été infructueux. Je haïssais ma patrie. Toutes les impertinences des peuples divers, parmi lesquels j'ai vécu, m'ont réconcilié avec elle. Quand je n'aurais tiré d'autre bénéfice de mes voyages que celui-là, je n'en regretterais ni les frais ni les fatigues.—LE COSMOPOLITE.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST AND SECOND CANTOS

THE following poem was written, for the most part, amidst the scenes which it attempts to describe. It was begun in Albania; and the parts relative to Spain and Portugal were composed from the author's observations in those countries. Thus much it may be necessary to state for the correctness of the descriptions. The scenes attempted to be sketched are in Spain, Portugal, Epirus, Acarnania, and Greece. There, for the present, the poem stops; its reception will determine whether the

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author may venture to conduct his readers to the capital of the East, through Ionia and Phrygia: these two cantos are merely experimental.

A fictitious character is introduced for the sake of giving some connexion to the piece; which, however, makes no pretension to regularity. It has been suggested to me by friends, on whose opinions I set a high value, that in this fictitious character, 'Childe Harold,' I may incur the suspicion of having intended some real personage: this I beg leave, once for all, to disclaim—Harold is the child of imagination, for the purpose I have stated. In some very trivial particulars, and those merely local, there might be grounds for such a notion; but in the main points, I should hope, none whatever.

It is almost superfluous to mention that the appellation 'Childe,' as 'Childe Waters,' 'Childe Childers,' &c., is used as more consonant with the old structure of versification which I have adopted. The 'Good Night,' in the beginning of the first canto, was suggested by 'Lord Maxwell's Good Night,' in the *Border Minstrelsy*, edited by Mr Scott.

With the different poems which have been published on Spanish subjects, there may be found some slight coincidence in the first part, which treats of the Peninsula, but it can only be casual; as, with the exception of a few concluding stanzas, the whole of this poem was written in the Levant.

The stanza of Spenser, according to one of our most successful poets, admits of every variety. Dr Beattie makes the following observation:—'Not long ago, I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser,

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PREFACE

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in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of composition¹.— Strengthened in my opinion by such authority, and by the example of some in the highest order of Italian poets, I shall make no apology for attempts at similar variations in the following composition; satisfied that if they are unsuccessful, their failure must be in the execution, rather than in the design, sanctioned by the practice of Ariosto, Thomson, and Beattie.

LONDON, *February*, 1812.

ADDITION TO THE PREFACE

I have now waited till almost all our periodical journals have distributed their usual portion of criticism. To the justice of the generality of their criticisms I have nothing to object: it would ill become me to quarrel with their very slight degree of censure, when, perhaps, if they had been less kind they had been more candid. Returning, therefore, to all and each my best thanks for their liberality, on one point alone shall I venture an observation. Amongst the many objections justly urged to the very indifferent character of the 'vagrant Childe,' (whom, notwithstanding many hints to the contrary, I still maintain to be a fictitious personage), it has been stated, that, besides the anachronism, he is

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very *unknightly*, as the times of the Knights were times of Love, Honour, and so forth. Now, it so happens that the good old times, when 'l'amour du bon vieux tems, l'amour antique,' flourished, were the most profligate of all possible centuries. Those who have any doubts on this subject may consult Sainte-Palaye, *passim*, and more particularly vol. ii. p. 69¹. The vows of chivalry were no better kept than any other vows whatsoever; and the songs of the Troubadours were not more decent, and certainly were much less refined, than those of Ovid. The 'Cours d'amour, parlemens d'amour, ou de courtesie et de gentillesse' had much more of love than of courtesy or gentleness. See Roland on the same subject with Sainte-Palaye. Whatever other objection may be urged to that most unamiable personage Childe Harold, he was so far perfectly knightly in his attributes—'No waiter, but a knight templar².' By the by, I fear that Sir Tristrem and Sir Lancelot were no better than they should be, although very poetical personages and true knights 'sans peur,' though not 'sans reproche.' If the story of the institution of the 'Garter' be not a fable, the knights of that order have for several centuries borne the badge of a Countess of Salisbury, of indifferent memory. So much for chivalry. Burke need not have regretted that its days are over, though Marie-Antoinette was quite as chaste as most of those in whose honour lances were shivered, and knights unhorsed.

Before the days of Bayard, and down to those of Sir Joseph Banks (the most chaste and celebrated of

¹ *Mémoires sur l'Ancienne Chevalerie*, Par. 1781.

² *The Rovers, or the Double Arrangement*.

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ADDITION TO THE PREFACE

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ancient and modern times), few exceptions will be found to this statement; and I fear a little investigation will teach us not to regret these monstrous mummeries of the middle ages.

I now leave 'Childe Harold' to live his day, such as he is; it had been more agreeable, and certainly more easy, to have drawn an amiable character. It had been easy to varnish over his faults, to make him do more and express less, but he never was intended as an example, further than to show, that early perversion of mind and morals leads to satiety of past pleasures and disappointment in new ones, and that even the beauties of nature and the stimulus of travel (except ambition, the most powerful of all excitements) are lost on a soul so constituted, or rather misdirected. Had I proceeded with the poem, this character would have deepened as he drew to the close; for the outline which I once meant to fill up for him was, with some exceptions, the sketch of a modern Timon, perhaps a poetical Zeluco.

LONDON, 1813.

TO IANTHE

NOT in those climes where I have late been straying,
 Though Beauty long hath there been matchless
 deem'd;
 Not in those visions to the heart displaying
 Forms which it sighs but to have only dream'd,
 Hath aught like thee in truth or fancy seem'd: 5
 Nor, having seen thee, shall I vainly seek
 To paint those charms which varied as they beam'd—
 To such as see thee not my words were weak;
 To those who gaze on thee what language could they
 speak?

Ah! may'st thou ever be what now thou art, 10
 Nor unbeseem the promise of thy spring,
 As fair in form, as warm yet pure in heart,
 Love's image upon earth without his wing,
 And guileless beyond Hope's imagining!
 And surely she who now so fondly rears 15
 Thy youth, in thee, thus hourly brightening,
 Beholds the rainbow of her future years,
 Before whose heavenly hues all sorrow disappears.

Young Peri of the West!—'t is well for me
 My years already doubly number thine; 20
 My loveless eye unmoved may gaze on thee,
 And safely view thy ripening beauties shine;
 Happy, I ne'er shall see them in decline;

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TO IANTHE

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Happier, that while all younger hearts shall bleed,
 Mine shall escape the doom thine eyes assign 25
 To those whose admiration shall succeed,
 But mix'd with pangs to Love's even loveliest hours
 decreed.

Oh! let that eye, which, wild as the Gazelle's,
 Now brightly bold or beautifully shy,
 Wins as it wanders, dazzles where it dwells, 30
 Glance o'er this page, nor to my verse deny
 That smile for which my breast might vainly sigh
 Could I to thee be ever more than friend:
 This much, dear maid, accord; nor question why
 To one so young my strain I would commend, 35
 But bid me with my wreath one matchless lily blend.

Such is thy name with this my verse entwined;
 And long as kinder eyes a look shall cast
 On Harold's page, Ianthe's here enshrined
 Shall thus be first beheld, forgotten last: 40
 My days once number'd, should this homage past
 Attract thy fairy fingers near the lyre
 Of him who hail'd thee, loveliest as thou wast,
 Such is the most my memory may desire;
 Though more than Hope can claim, could Friendship
 less require? 45

CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE

CANTO THE FIRST

I

OH, thou! in Hellas deem'd of heavenly birth,
 Muse! form'd or fabled at the minstrel's will!
 Since shamed full oft by later lyres on earth,
 Mine dares not call thee from thy sacred hill:
 Yet there I've wander'd by thy vaunted rill; 5
 Yes! sigh'd o'er Delphi's long deserted shrine,
 Where, save that feeble fountain, all is still;
 Nor mote my shell awake the weary Nine
 To grace so plain a tale—this lowly lay of mine.

II

Whilome in Albion's isle there dwelt a youth, 10
 Who ne in virtue's ways did take delight;
 But spent his days in riot most uncouth,
 And vex'd with mirth the drowsy ear of Night.
 Ah me! in sooth he was a shameless wight,
 Sore given to revel and ungodly glee; 15
 Few earthly things found favour in his sight
 Save concubines and carnal companie,
 And flaunting wassailers of high and low degree.

CANTO ONE

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III

Childe Harold was he hight:—but whence his name
 And lineage long, it suits me not to say; 20
 Suffice it, that perchance they were of fame,
 And had been glorious in another day:
 But one sad losel soils a name for aye,
 However mighty in the olden time;
 Nor all that heralds rake from coffin'd clay, 25
 Nor florid prose, nor honeyed lies of rhyme,
 Can blazon evil deeds, or consecrate a crime.

IV

Childe Harold bask'd him in the noontide sun,
 Disporting there like any other fly;
 Nor deem'd before his little day was done 30
 One blast might chill him into misery.
 But long ere scarce a third of his pass'd by,
 Worse than adversity the Childe befell;
 He felt the fulness of satiety:
 Then loathed he in his native land to dwell, 35
 Which seem'd to him more lone than Eremite's sad cell.

V

For he through Sin's long labyrinth had run,
 Nor made atonement when he did amiss,
 Had sigh'd to many though he loved but one,
 And that loved one, alas! could ne'er be his. 40
 Ah, happy she! to 'scape from him whose kiss
 Had been pollution unto aught so chaste;
 Who soon had left her charms for vulgar bliss,
 And spoil'd her goodly lands to gild his waste,
 Nor calm domestic peace had ever deign'd to taste. 45

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VI

And now Childe Harold was sore sick at heart,
 And from his fellow bacchanals would flee;
 'Tis said, at times the sullen tear would start,
 But Pride congeal'd the drop within his ee:
 Apart he stalk'd in joyless reverie, 50
 And from his native land resolved to go,
 And visit scorching climes beyond the sea;
 With pleasure drugg'd, he almost long'd for woe,
 And e'en for change of scene would seek the shades
 below.

VII

The Childe departed from his father's hall: 55
 It was a vast and venerable pile;
 So old, it seem'd only not to fall,
 Yet strength was pillar'd in each massy aisle.
 Monastic dome! condemn'd to uses vile!
 Where Superstition once had made her den 60
 Now Paphian girls were known to sing and smile;
 And monks might deem their time was come agen,
 If ancient tales say true, nor wrong these holy men.

VIII

Yet oft-times in his maddest mirthful mood
 Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's
 brow, 65
 As if the memory of some deadly feud
 Or disappointed passion lurk'd below:
 But this none knew, nor haply cared to know;