Introduction

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The literary canon notoriously ignores context. Canonization removes authors and texts from their particular domains of production and reception, ushering them into the transcendent realm of the classical pantheon – remote, unchanging and monumentalized. All those pesky contingencies of time and place fall away, and the canonized work is left, supposedly, to speak for itself.

But what does that mean? Can we so easily separate text from context? What if the text itself forms a context? Addressing these questions compels us to recognize that context is essential to understanding literary texts and the work they do. Paradoxically, even acts of canonization that willfully ignore context are themselves acts of contextualization – and are among the many frames of reference that "the work itself" solicits for its readers.

This book's cover image, Mathieu Barathier's *Lord Biron Dédié aux Romantiques* (1826), is an exuberant allegory of canonization. Like a traditional devotional tableau, it is divided into earthly and heavenly zones, and we read time spatially, following Byron's progress upward from death to commemoration to apotheosis. At the top, on a plume of billowing clouds illuminated by shafts of sunlight, is the eternally young Byron of the iconic "Cloak Portrait," Thomas Phillips' 1813 *Portrait of a Nobleman* (see Figure I.1). Below this transcendent image, the clouds darken to a serpentine line of smoke, which frames a tableau of Byron's body, recumbent on a sarcophagus, draped in a gossamer-thin shroud. Through a scrim of smoke or incense, we witness an intimate *levée*. The dedication is in progress. The muses of lyric poetry, in various states of semi-undress, wail and dash their lyres against their breasts, in agony and ecstasy. In this vaguely cosmic landscape, classical appurtenances officiate – a well-wrought urn and sleek sarcophagus, laurels and lyres. The horned lyres flaunt their biblical affinity, recalling the altar in the Book of Exodus whose brass horns frame the sacrificial smoke joining earth with heaven.

Beneath the muses' delicately sandaled feet, the waves of the Mediterranean dash the blackened shores of Missolonghi, where Byron died in April 1824, and where the invading Ottoman forces burnt the town two years later in the final stages of the Greek Revolution. Smoke, clouds and incense are all messed up together, echoing the poignant confusion of these tiny liturgical dancers; but amidst the frenzied unravelling, there is method, deliberation and ritual. A logic of working through predominates: in the resolution performed by canonization, the smoke rising from the ruins becomes devotional incense and then the clouds of ascension. Scandalous celebrity is burnished into transcendent canonicity. As its ambiguous title suggests, the image enacts the canonization it represents: Byron and the image alike are "dedicated to the Romantics."

Barathier's smoke machine generates a heady mixture of classical antiquity, baroque agitation, neoclassical mannerism and Romantic consecration. Byron has been wildly, exuberantly, lifted out of context. Or has he? For all its kitsch transcendentalizing, this engraving was timely, commemorating the fall of Missolonghi and Byron's death. By aligning the two, Barathier recruits Byron's magnificent stock of symbolic capital to the causes of Greece and Romantic poetry. And for all its studied neoclassical detail, this commemoration is also an act of mourning, drenched with emotion.

Barathier's image also seems to fulfill the prophecy in one of Byron's very last poems, "On this day I complete my thirty sixth year," written in Missolonghi to commemorate his birthday on January 22, 1824:

> The fire that on my bosom preys
> Is lone as some Volcanic Isle,
> No torch is kindled at its blaze
> A funeral pile!
> (3, ll. 9–12 [*CPW* VII: 79]).

Smouldering here is Byron's unrequited love for his fifteen-year-old pageboy Loukas Chalandritsanos. Mary Shelley, Byron's amanuensis, added at the end of her copy of the poem: "E Spento quel fuoco – e lo copre piciol marmo" ("that fire is dead – and the marble pediment covers him" [*CPW* VII: 152, n. 40]). The presence of this note reminds us that Shelley's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, had died just over eighteen months earlier (in July 1822), his remains cremated on the beach at Viareggio. The note also highlights Mary Shelley's role in the process of textual creation. Contexts are also summoned by what the old New Critics used to call the "words on the page" or "the work itself." Texts such as Byron's poem, Shelley's copy or

Barathier's drawing are themselves powerful agents, changing the context of what is read or seen, keeping open the question of when – if ever – a text is completed. Posthumous publication and commemoration rekindle the torch.

Far from being an ahistorical celebration of the universal spirit of poetry, Barathier's drawing commemorates and transfigures historical events. His scene recalls Byron's funeral in Missolonghi, with its effusive eulogy spoken by Spyridon Trikoupis (who later wrote the first Greek history of the Revolution) and the crown of laurels placed upon the coffin – transforming what was originally "a rude, ill-constructed chest of wood" into the pure white marble sarcophagus of classical antiquity (Pietro Gamba, quoted in Marchand III: 1235–6). In keeping with ancient Greek customs, the marble pediment provides a home for the departed spirit and also releases it into the transcendent space of immortal fame. As to the body, Dr. Millingen, the attending physician, thought it "vied with that of Apollo himself," while, according to Missolonghi legend, the local woman who laid out the corpse fancied it "white like the wing of a young chicken" (Marchand III: 1231, 1232).

The impulse to canonize Byron – in 1826 as now – was by no means universal. Indeed, it was only continental Europe that celebrated Byron posthumously as the poet laureate of liberty. In France, as Gilles Soubigou notes, Byron was immediately transformed into "one of Europe's 'great men' – a hero who helped make a nation, modern Greece."[1] In Britain, however, skepticism prevailed. Westminster Abbey turned away both Byron's body and his statue. Many contemporaries poured scorn on Byron's political aspirations. The radical William Hazlitt regarded his participation in the Greek War of Independence as "preposterous *liberalism*."[2] That reading remained influential well into the twentieth century, but recent criticism confirms that Byron's politics were far more complex than previously thought, and far more imbricated with his poetry. Many of the chapters in this volume reflect that understanding.

Byron's writings themselves are saturated with context. Even at their most intimate, they usher the reader into the wider world, from the social, political and literary circles of Regency London to the geopolitical spaces of Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic Europe, the Middle East, the Americas and the Pacific. These geopolitical contexts are overlaid by biographical narratives of travel and exile, sustained from the opening canto of Byron's first commercial success, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), to *The Island* (1823), the last verse narrative Byron completed, about the

Bounty mutiny, where the Polynesian setting channels Byron's travels in Greece and his childhood in Scotland. Such interpenetration of the biographical, aesthetic and geopolitical is one of the constitutive pleasures and challenges of Byron's *oeuvre*.

This book aims to guide students, readers and researchers through the intersecting fields of biography, literary culture and reception, and the intellectual and cultural movements informing the history and politics of the Romantic period. It offers many ways of understanding Byron's works and heightening the pleasure of reading them, while elucidating their power as contexts themselves and highlighting their claim to agency and historical enactment in the wider world. It assembles work by scholars from around the globe on a range of vital topics grouped in four key categories: biography and textual production; political, social and intellectual contexts; literary cultures; and Byron's ongoing reception and interpretation.

Part I: Life and Works begins with the exploration of Byron's life as a context for his writing, in three broadly biographical chapters: "The Early Years" by Jonathan Gross, "The Years of Fame" by Diego Saglia and "Exile" by Jane Stabler. These chapters emphasize the interrelations between the personal, the literary and the political that are a hallmark of the Byron phenomenon. They are attuned to the intimate, social and intertextual relationships informing Byron's life and work, and explain the significance of the sites where he traveled, lived and wrote. From the beginning, Byron's writing is imbricated with place. So, Jonathan Gross observes about Byron's early writing: "Poetry became a contract of celebrity, a form of advertising for the small town of Southwell" in Nottinghamshire where the young Byron lived with his mother. Later, Diego Saglia details how "Byron's life was closely associated with Regency London as a metropolitan hub of pleasure, politics, culture and consumption." Here Byron blended his "cosmopolitan aura … with his metropolitan and provincial identities" and "monitored the literary scene." In her chapter on exile, Jane Stabler notes that exile for Byron was a state of mind – and a desired identity – well before it became an experiential reality; the young poet "rehearsed going into exile in 1809" at the age of twenty-one. In Italy, he adopted the quintessentially Italian verse-form of *ottava rima*, through which he "recast" his "role as a brooding outsider" and mounted a sustained attack on English expectations.

The chapters in the second half of Part I discuss how Byron's manuscripts became published texts, often disseminated in multiple material forms. They also illuminate the social dimensions of textual production and

circulation. Outlining the complexities of Byron's often baffling writing methods, Tom Mole notes that Byron "rarely finished a poem in manuscript and then submitted it" for publication, but often adopted the ideas of his collaborators such as Mary Shelley, whose intentions "in effect became his own." Hence Byron's "intentions for his works are not always straightforwardly 'his.'" In the next chapter, Mary O'Connell highlights how Byron and his publishers jointly produced Byronic celebrity as a commercial enterprise, in spite of Byron's sustained "ambivalence about writing, publishing and commercial success." Finally, Gary Dyer examines the fakes, forgeries and piracies that became a vital component of Byronic textual production. These "illegitimate" publications accelerated the circulation of Byron's work and helped him establish his extraordinary popularity.

Part II: Political, Social and Intellectual Transformations registers the social and political changes that marked Regency Britain and Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic Europe during the Romantic period. The chapters in this section follow interconnected lines of enquiry across political, geopolitical, cross-cultural, social and intellectual contexts; they engage the public-intimate spheres that are inflected by broader transformations.

Several of the chapters deal with geopolitical shifts. As John Beckett observes, Byron's active political career, which began in Britain's House of Lords in 1809–16, shifted focus during his years of exile to encompass "involvement with the liberal-nationalist causes of the Carbonari and Greece." Byron took his seat as a liberal Whig when "the Tories were in power" and the "country was at war with France, as it had been almost continuously since 1793." War too was undergoing major changes, as Neil Ramsey observes: it was becoming total and global, "the conflict extending across Europe and reaching into the Indian subcontinent, America, and the Middle East." Ramsey's chapter explores how this conflict is registered with extraordinary complexity in Byron's work.

The next two chapters deal with Greece and Italy, where Byron spent most of his exile. Spiridoula Demetriou examines Byron's involvement in the Greek War of Independence and his relationship with contemporary British Philhellenism. She explores not only how Greece forms a context for understanding Byron, but also how Byron's life, writing and death there offer a context for understanding modern Greece. Reviewing Byron's response to Italy, Timothy Webb details his engagement with Italian language and culture, social and sexual customs, and the rituals of daily life that had such a profound influence on Byron's life and work.

Currents of cross-cultural exchange are central to Byron's life and writings and to the broader geopolitical transformations mediated by his work. Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud's chapter on "Orientalism" explores Byron as "a writer whose writing and personal mystique are fundamentally defined by his mobilization of cultural difference." It ponders how far Byron's "cultural appropriation of Eastern peoples, habits and settings" contributed to "the emerging regime of British imperialism, which reached its ideological and territorial peak in the long nineteenth century."

The mobilization of cultural difference was connected to a growing recognition of the cultural relativity of religious belief. Here, Christine Kenyon Jones reviews Byron's "shifting and multiple religious identifications and sympathies … not only in relation to his biography but also within the complex landscape of religious belief and the politics of religion in the Romantic period." Religion was entangled with the emergence of science as an alternative source of authority. Thomas H. Ford observes how the "speculative materialism of Byron's poetry from the late 1810s" drew on contemporary scientific ideas, "particularly those he could mobilize against traditional religious conceptions of divine benevolence and official morality." Byron's work often forged "startling links … between scientific concepts and the wider cultural and linguistic practices that generated them."

The book next turns to chapters on social-intimate contexts: "Sexuality" (Richard C. Sha), "Libertinism" (Adam Komisaruk) and "Fashion, Self-Fashioning and the Body" (Laura J. George). Richard C. Sha outlines how Romantic-period scientific discourse sought to produce normative modes of sexuality based on supposedly "natural" paradigms such as the Linnaean system of plant sexuality, which was used to allegorize human sexuality. In the following chapter, Adam Komisaruk grapples with the elusive phenomenon of libertinism, which forms an important context for a range of Byronic concerns. The meaning of the term is unstable, Komisaruk emphasizes, but productively so, with a range of applications, depending on whether it was used contemporaneously or retrospectively; by its adherents or detractors; in England or elsewhere; and depending on "how its variously spiritual, philosophical, political and sexual contexts did and did not intersect." Laura J. George closes this section with an examination of the domains of fashion, self-fashioning and the body. These provide a context for understanding Byron's "oppositional explorations of masculinity" that register how

"[r]elationships between masculine style, specularity and power shifted dramatically" in Regency Britain.

Part III: Literary Cultures engages the specifically literary contexts of Byron's vast and complex multi-generic *oeuvre*. Emphasizing how Byron's literary form is always intertextually and socially grounded, the chapters in this section focus on literary traditions, genres, influences and sociable circles and "schools," locating Byron's formal concerns in their social and historical contexts and extending the biographical narrative plotted in Part I. Byron's works are situated within contexts of ever-changing traditions and currents of literary innovation. What becomes clear is that experimentation and transformation are the hallmarks of Byron's approach to tradition and influence. So Bernard Beatty outlines the eighteenth-century reworking of classical traditions that Byron in turn reworks, primarily through Pope. Illuminating both the stylistic practices and the controversies that informed Byron's relationship with the neoclassical tradition, Beatty demonstrates how his rejection of Romanticism's devaluation of the Augustans had "as much to do with politics as literary taste."

Other chapters in this section concern particular genres: epic, romance, lyric, satire and drama, proceeding from the earliest literary practitioners through to Byron's Romantic contemporaries. On epic, Carla Pomarè observes that Byron's participation in the genre is "a long-debated issue." He did, however, manifest a particular interest in historiography, which is "relevant … to almost all the genres he experimented with." As a result, Byron's epic was marked by a "peculiar investment in the relationships between the world of fiction and the world of facts."

Demonstrating how the aesthetic and the geopolitical are interconnected in Byron's work, Omar F. Miranda observes of the romance: "In his hands, a genre that had once been confined to the courts of medieval Europe developed into a global form with a diversity of subject matter and settings across Europe and Asia." Byron's participation in many genres is equally transformative – looking backwards to older traditions and forwards to the innovations of the avant-garde. Anna Camilleri's chapter on "Byron's Lyric Practice" explains how Byron's mode of lyric has been neglected because it runs counter to expectations of the genre: where lyric was supposed to be private and unheard, "Byron's lyric voice is performative, insincere, insouciant and playful." Audience is the key. As Mark Canuel demonstrates in his discussion of satire, "Byron's satirical stance criticizes the production of normative aesthetic and political values while carving out an inclusive

yet rigorously refined discourse that connects the satiric persona to his audience."

That satirical opposition to normative values influenced alliances and antagonisms as well as the groupings of various "schools." Mirka Horová's chapter on the Satanic School engages the controversy surrounding Robert Southey's coinage of the moniker – delivered with "the causticity of a manic street preacher" – and Byron's provocative backward look to earlier forms of sympathy with the devil such as Milton's Satan and Whig libertinism. Similarly, Madeleine Callaghan's chapter on the Lake poets explores Byron's rich intertextual relations with Coleridge and Wordsworth, in particular, arguing that "even at their most apparently divergent, the conversation between the poets reveals the depth of the engagement across their works." In the next chapter, Susan J. Wolfson takes up Southey as a powerful case study of intertextual revision in the form of Byron's "muse," "to show a different 'Southey,' not the one in Byron's scathing sights but a surprising brother in song."

One of the most dynamic sites of intertextual influence is also one of the most contested. The question of how Byron was influenced, and by whom, is particularly fraught in relation to women writers, as Caroline Franklin demonstrates. Charting Byron's habitual anxieties and ambivalence about women writers, she illuminates how his attacks on them often functioned as a "smokescreen" to deflect the visible signs of their influence on his work. Rather than seeing this misogyny as "quaint belatedness," Franklin traces it to contemporary conflicts, showing how "[t]he bluestocking values of female intellectualism and philanthropy survived the antifeminist reaction following the French revolution."

Continuing Part III's discussion of schools, Maria Schoina notes in her essay on the Pisan circle and the Cockney school that some of the schools were coinages manufactured by "reactionary periodicals" channeling "Tory anxiety over the formation of 'free thinking' literary circles." Nevertheless, they often reflect shared poetic enterprises and political ideals based on active affiliations, sociable networks and friendships. So, for example, understanding Byron's involvement in the oft-derided "Pisan circle, and its affiliate, the Cockney School of poetry," sheds light on "certain phases of the poet's career [and] also Romantic literary and political culture in general."

In his essay on "Theater and Drama", Rolf P. Lessenich explores the relationship between publicity and closet drama that energizes Byron's drama and its perversely mediated relation to the London stage: "On the one hand, provocative heresy had to be made public in order to question received opinions and create scandalous celebrity; on the other, publication and public performance risked intervention" by the government. This is followed by chapters on autobiography (Alan Rawes) and literary theory (Clara Tuite),

seemingly marginal genres in Byron's work. Both chapters trace how the structuring impulses of autobiography and theory animate Byron's oeuvre. Rawes' chapter locates Byron's "self-writing" in relation to two eighteenth-century models: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's confessional "unveiling" and the "fictional autobiographer" of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* that reflects on the difficulties of any attempt to narrativize "a coherent self." Rawes identifies how these two modes of "revealing the intimacies of the self and/or reflecting on selfhood per se … were to become key tropes of Romantic autobiography." Part III closes with Andrew Franta's chapter on periodical culture, which examines how Byron's career developed in "close proximity to the developing culture of reviewing," and argues that "the literary world into which the new poet sought to introduce himself in the early nineteenth century was one that was in the process of being remade by the interconnection of poetry and the reviews."

Part IV: Reception and Afterlives considers the history of reception, reinvention and afterlife that Byron has inspired, from the original moment of production to our current moment – exploring the diverse cultures of reception that continue to mark the Byron phenomenon as a living ecology in the twenty-first century.

Picking up from Franta's chapter, William Christie surveys the critical reception of Byron's work during his lifetime in the major periodicals. Detailing how Byron's early collection *Hours of Idleness* (1807) suffered under the nominally Whig *Edinburgh*'s "labile, upper-class critical hijinks," Christie notes that the big reviews, such as the *Edinburgh*, the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, "may have had barely concealed political priorities, but this did not always translate into predictable allegiances." Moving from mainstream reception, Jason Goldsmith takes us to the dynamic cultures of radical and labouring-class reception – a world that includes William Hone's parodies, John Clare's Byron poems and Chartist poems and manifestos of the 1830s and 1840s, all of which enthusiastically embraced Byron's politics and literature, in sharp contrast to mainstream Whig and Tory reception in England.

Peter Vassallo explores how Byron's European reception focused as much on Byron's political influence as his literary influence, particularly in Italy and Greece, where Byron was celebrated as "a champion of liberalism and nationalistic sentiment." Nevertheless, the European "reading and misreading" of Byron's poems and persona could be complex and contradictory, with Byron regarded in France, for example, as both a "pro-Bonapartist aristocrat" and a symbol of revolution.

Julian North discusses the vast archive of recollections, conversations and biographies of Byron that appeared after his death in 1824, arguing

that "the many thousands of pages of biography devoted to Byron in the decades following his death formed the most substantial embodiment of his evolving cultural presence through the nineteenth century."

Eric Eisner addresses the later nineteenth-century reception and reworking of Byron in Britain and North America, where he finds a hardening separation between critical and popular reception. Ironically, he points out, "Within a strengthening critical hierarchy distinguishing commercial entertainment from 'serious' literature, however, Byron's very popularity told against him. Even by the early 1830s, critics spoke of the embarrassing excesses of 'Byromania' as a bygone fad." More recently, as Lindsey Eckert observes, Byron has displayed extraordinary endurance as both a subject of scholarly interest and a figure of popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, across a range of cultural media. "Byron's popular reception history reveals itself most strikingly" when looking "beyond the literary and printed to the variety of quirky and kitsch, serious and sensational, digital and decorative adaptations indebted to his life and works."

In her account of contemporary scholarship, Ghislaine McDayter notes it is "one of the greatest ironies of literary studies that the poet most renowned for his 'self-conscious' biographical impulses and 'egotism' has nonetheless inspired a deep sense of mystery about the 'truth' of his character, his poetic process and his art." On the topic of truth, McDayter argues that "for many prior scholars, what makes Byron 'wanting' as a poet might have been the fact that he could not be situated within their own paradigms of Romanticism," but that "for a new generation of scholars … the poet's resistance to such universalizing theories is his greatest appeal."

Byron's writing, life and spectacular model of authorship transformed literary culture in the Regency period and inspired new reading practices. How does this writing and these changed modes of reading speak to us now in the twenty-first century? Every chapter in this volume shows how reading functions as an act of contextualization or recontextualization. Each contributor proposes an act of recontextualization. Ultimately, as each of these chapters illuminates a particular aspect of Byron's work, life and reception – providing frames of reference for reading the work and understanding Byron's vital place within Romantic literature – they also provide insights into how we might think of "Byron" not only in context but also *as* context.