

Byron and Women [*and men*]

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Edited by

Peter Cochran

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P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

Some of the papers in this book were given at a conference on *Byron and Women (and Men)* organised by the Newstead Byron Society and the Midland Romantic Seminar at Nottingham Trent University on May 2nd 2009.

I should like to thank Ken Purslow, Carl Thompson, and everyone else who assisted in making the day a success.

—P.C.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Anna Camilleri is a DPhil candidate at Balliol College, Oxford where she is also a College Lecturer. Her thesis is provisionally titled "The Heroism of Byron's Heroines" and examines Byron's abiding concern with the active individuality of women, and, more especially, in the development of a specific, new kind of gendered heroism. She has given papers on Byron and Auden, the figure of the Belle Sauvage in *The Island*, and Byron's women warriors. Other areas of interest include literary theories of gender and genre, Austen, and Auden.

Richard Cardwell is Emeritus Professor of Modern Spanish Literature at the University of Nottingham. Along with editing both a special bi-centennial issue of *Renaissance and Modern Studies* (1988) on *Byron and Europe* and *Lord Byron the European: Essays from the International Byron Society, July 1994* (1997), he has published essays on Byron, Keats, and European Romanticism, including Byron's impact on Spanish writers.

He is also the author of over one hundred articles and over twenty books and editions on nineteenth-century Spanish writers and literary history in the period 1800-1930 in Spain. He has lectured in Argentina, Brazil, Denmark, France, Georgia, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the United States, where he also taught as Visiting Professor. He is editor of *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, 2 vols, London-New York, Thoemmes-Continuum, 2005. In 2009 he was invited by the Spanish Ministry of Culture to deliver a lecture in the National Library, Madrid.

Peter Cochran is responsible for the editions of Byron's works and correspondence on the International Byron Society website. He edits the *Newstead Byron Society Review*, and has lectured on Byron in many countries. For CSP he has edited and written *Byron in London*, *Byron at the Theatre*, *The Gothic Byron*, "Romanticism" – and *Byron and Byron and Orientalism*.

David Herbert has been a member of the Byron Society since 1974 and became the first chairman of the Newstead Abbey Byron Society in 1988. He has given many papers with reference mainly to the Byron connection with Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. He entered the local hosiery and then the footwear industry and trained in various aspects of management. He has written two books: *Lady Byron and Earl Shilton* (1997), and a biography of the MP and leading industrialist George Ward (2006).

Ralph Lloyd-Jones is a Chartered Librarian in Nottinghamshire. He has published many articles and lectured extensively on Byron, particularly about his domestic arrangements. He is also an expert on Sir John Franklin and Victorian Arctic exploration. His many contributions to the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* include Byron's servants William Fletcher, Robert Rushton and Tita Falcieri, as well as his friend and financial advisor Douglas Kinnaird.

Song Qingbao is a lecturer in the Humanities Department of CUPL (the Chinese University of Political Science and Law). He was a visiting scholar in the Byron Centre of the University of Manchester from September 2008 to September 2009. He received his PhD from Beijing Language University in July 2006. His doctoral dissertation was *Byron in China*.

Gavin Sourgen is a DPhil candidate at Balliol College, Oxford, writing his thesis on “Byron: Aesthetics and History”. A former junior lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, his main research and teaching interests include the relationship between history and poetics in Romantic and Victorian poetry.

Jack Gumpert Wasserman is a lawyer and a director of several public companies. For over forty years he has been collecting books, documents and iconography relating to the work, life, times, and circle of Lord Byron, and has written and lectured on various aspects of Byron. He is a director of Save Venice Inc. and the Grolier Club, a Fellow of the Pierpont Morgan Library and a past chairman of the Raoul Wallenberg Committee of the United States. He and his wife reside in New York.

ABBREVIATIONS

To economize on space in the notes, the following abbreviations are used for the books referred to. See the Bibliography for further information.

- BB: *Byron's Bulldog, The Letters of John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Byron*, ed. Peter W. Graham, Ohio 1984.
- BJ: *Byron Journal*.
- BLJ: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols, John Murray, 1973-94.
- Coleridge: *The Works of Lord Byron: A New, Revised and Enlarged Edition with illustrations. Poetry*, ed. E.H.Coleridge, seven vols, John Murray, 1898-1904.
- CHP: *Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.
- CMP: *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991.
- CPW: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980-93.
- DJ: *Byron, Don Juan*.
- HVSV: *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* edited with an introduction and notes by Ernest J. Lovell (New York: MacMillan, 1954).
- NABSR: *Newstead Byron Society Review*.
- NLS: National Library of Scotland.
- LBLI: Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*, trans. Rees, ed. Cochran, AUP (Delaware), 2005.
- LJM: *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Liverpool University Press, 2007.
- LLB: Langley Moore, Doris. *The Late Lord Byron* (John Murray, 1961).
- Marchand: Marchand, Leslie A., *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1957.
- RR: *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, Garland, 1972.
- SAHC Fischer, Doucet Devin and Reiman, Donald, eds., *Shelley and his Circle* (Harvard 1961-2002).

If a prose quotation is left-justified only, it is taken from the original manuscript; if left- and right-justified, from a printed source. Codes are as follows:

<Authorial deletion>

<xxxxx> Irrecoverable authorial deletion

{Interlineated word or phrase}

E[ditoria]l A[dditio]n

[] Illegible

INTRODUCTION: THE BISEXUAL BYRON

PETER COCHRAN

**“I cannot exist without some object of love” – Byron to Lady Melbourne,
November 9th 1812.¹**

**“I could love anything on earth that appeared to wish it; at the same time I do
like to chuse for myself” – Byron to Lady Melbourne, November 26th 1812.²**

Byron’s *Detached Thoughts* 73 and 74 (written late in 1821) go thus:

73.

People have wondered at the Melancholy which runs through my writings.
– Others have wondered at my personal gaiety – – but I recollect once <in>
{after} an hour in which I had been sincerely and particularly gay – and
rather brilliant in company – my wife replying to me when I said (upon her
remarking my high spirits) “and yet Bell – I have {been} called and
mis=called Melancholy – you must have seen how falsely, frequently. “No
– B – (she answered) it is not so – at heart you are the most melancholy of
mankind, and often when apparently gayest. – – –

[*swirl*]

74.

If I could explain at length the real causes which have contributed to
increase this perhaps natural temperament of mine – this Melancholy
which hath made me a bye=word – – nobody would wonder – – but this is
impossible without doing much mischief. – ————³

The long dashes say what Byron cannot write. “Much mischief” would
indeed have befallen him had he revealed – and, in England, acted upon –
the most important fact about himself – that he was as attracted to his own

1: BLJ II 243

2: BLJ II 251.

3: Text from NLS Ms.43352; BLJ IX 11-52.

sex as he was to the opposite. In the east, things were different. On October 4th 1810 he writes to Hobhouse, from Patras in Greece (“M.” is Charles Skinner Matthews, their Cambridge friend, who is gay in aspiration, if not achievement):

Tell M. that I have obtained above two hundred pl&optC’s and am almost tired of them, for the history of these he must wait my return, as after many attempts I have given up the idea of conveying information on paper. – You know the monastery of Mendelee, it was there I made myself master of the first. – Your last letter closes pathetically with a postscript about a nosegay, I advise you to introduce that into your next sentimental novel – I am sure I did not suspect you of any fine feelings, and I believe you are laughing, but you are welcome. – Vale, I can no more like L^d. Grizzle – y^{rs}.
μαίρων⁴

We can be certain that the stoic Hobhouse was not laughing. “pl&optCs” stands for “coitum plenum et optabilem”, their code for “getting laid with maximum satisfaction”. It’s from Petronius:

“Dii, inquam, immortales, si ego huic dormienti abstulero **coitum plenum et optabilem**, pro hac felicitate cras puero asturconem Macedonicum optimum donabo, cum hac tamen exceptione, si ille non senserit”. Nunquam altiore somno ephebus obdormivit.⁵ [“If only, ye Immortal Gods, I may win of this sleeping darling **full and happy satisfaction of my love**, for such bliss I will tomorrow present the lad with an Asturian of the Macedonian strain, the best to be had for money, but always on the condition he shall not feel my violence.’ Never did the stripling sleep more sound.”]⁶

Byron, as usual, crafts his tone for his correspondent(s). The modern buzz-word for his same-sex predilection is really “homosociality”. What he longed for was to be the adored leader and protector of a gang of younger boys, all of whom would happily give themselves to him – a new version of the guileless life he had led at Harrow. He had written about Harrow in *Childish Recollections*:

Hours of my youth! when, nurtured in my breast,
To Love a stranger, Friendship made me blest;
Friendship, the dear peculiar bond of youth,
When every artless bosom throbs with truth;

4: Text from NLS Ms.43438; BLJ II 21-3.

5: Text from <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/petronius1.html>.

6: Text from <http://www.igibud.com/petron/satyr/satyr11.html>.

Untaught my worldly wisdom how to feign,
 And check each impulse with prudential rein;
 When all we feel, our honest souls disclose,
 In love to friends, in open hate to foes;
 No varnished tales the lips of youth repeat,
 No dear-bought knowledge purchased by deceit,
 Hypocrisy, the gift of lengthened years,
 Matured by age, the garb of Prudence wears.⁷

If we hear echoes here of Gray's *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, they're not fortuitous: for Byron, literature and life often coalesced – just as the genders did. The boyhood for which he was nostalgic was that evoked by Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*:

We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun,
 And bleat the one at the other: what we changed
 Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
 The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
 That any did. Had we pursued that life,
 And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd
 With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven
 Boldly "not guilty"; the imposition clear'd
 Hereditary ours.⁸

For Polixenes and Leontes, heterosexuality brought about the corruption of their Eden. Sexuality – of whatever leaning – had the same effect on Byron. Almost from the moment he began writing poetry, "Prudence" dictated for him a measure of "hypocrisy". As his art matures, he operates from behind a series of increasingly sophisticated (and entertaining) façades, whose very style and frankness are designed to convince, even as they disguise.

For more on the way Byron reads Shakespeare, see Anna Camilleri's essay below.

We search in vain in Byron for anything like Blakean innocence or Wordsworthian sincerity (though Wordsworth was scarcely frank about his own life, even in his autobiographical verse). Not for nothing did those who saw Byron rehearse the part of Iago during the Pisan theatricals remark on the profound affiliation he achieved with that character. Adaptability of tone, and deceptive theatricality of manner, were his

7: *Childish Recollections*, ll.55-66.

8: Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, I ii 66-74.

stock-in-trade. By the time he writes *Don Juan* he's "being frank" about it:

And after all, what is a lie? 'tis but
 The Truth in Masquerade; and I defy
 Historians, heroes, lawyers, priests to put
 A fact without some leaven of a lie;
 The very Shadow of the Truth would shut
 Up Annals, Revelations, Poesy,
 And Prophecy; except it should be dated
 Some years before the incidents related.

Praised be all liars and all lies!⁹

He has *almost* elevated his relativistic manipulation of the truth into a Philosophy of Knowledge: if you cannot be certain even that you don't know, let alone that you do know, then you can't even be sure when you're lying and when you're not. It's a comforting thought for such an expert at "bamming and humming".¹⁰

We are dealing with an age less obsessed than ours with bisexuality (liminality, as Shona Allan calls it in her essay below). Men who are close are in 2010 assumed to be gay until proved otherwise: but in the early nineteenth century, as Richard Cardwell writes (also below) ...

... the cult of male friendship that began in the mid-seventeenth century had persisted ... By 1800 an elevated cult of exclusive male friendship had developed where men deemed these relationships superior to those of women since females were deemed incapable of friendship in its purest form.

Byron doubtless subscribed to this ideal with part of his being – but his being was capacious. Where it was that pure friendship terminated and something more interesting began, he left to the place, the time, and the situation.

He does not seem, in adulthood, to have been attracted to men of the same age as himself – not for him the humiliation of Percy Jocelyn, the Bishop of Clogher, "taken by the tail"¹¹ at the pub in the Haymarket, nor the cottaging urges that finally sent his friend William Banks (see below:

9: DJ XI sts.37-8.

10: See William St. Clair, *Bamming and Humming*, BJ 7 (1979) pp.38-47. "Bamming" is bamboozling, "Humming" is humbugging.

11: DJ VIII 76, 1. In fact it was the Bishop's friend, the guardsman, who was taken by the tail.

“my collegiate pastor and master ... the father of all mischiefs”)¹² into permanent exile.

We must not assume Byron to have been exclusively, still less primarily, homosexual.¹³ Byron’s heterosexual infatuations started well before his homosexual ones: in boyhood he worshipped his sylph-like cousin Mary Duff, and was in adolescence devastated at the marriage of Mary Chaworth. We need to keep the picture balanced. Of Mary Duff he writes,

... How very odd that I should have been so utterly, devotedly fond of that girl, at an age when I could neither feel passion, nor know the meaning of the word. And the effect! My mother used always to rally me about this childish amour; and, at last, many years after, when I was sixteen, she told me one day, “Oh, Byron, I have had a letter from Edinburgh, from Miss Abercromby, and your old sweetheart Mary Duff is married to a Mr. Coe.” And what was my answer? I really cannot explain or account for my feelings at that moment; but they nearly threw me into convulsions, and alarmed my mother so much, that after I grew better, she generally avoided the subject—to *me*—and contented herself with telling it to all her acquaintance. Now, what could this be? I had never seen her since her mother’s faux-pas at Aberdeen had been the cause of her removal to her grandmother’s at Banff; we were both the merest children. I had and have been attached fifty times since that period; yet I recollect all we said to each other, all our caresses, her features, my restlessness, sleeplessness, my tormenting my mother’s maid to write for me to her, which she at last did, to quiet me. Poor Nancy thought I was wild, and, as I could not write for myself, became my secretary. I remember, too, our walks, and the happiness of sitting by Mary, in the children’s apartment, at their house not far from the Plainstones at Aberdeen, while her lesser sister Helen played with the doll, and we sat gravely making love, in our way.

How the deuce did all this occur so early? where could it originate? I certainly had no sexual ideas for years afterwards; and yet my misery, my love for that girl were so violent, that I sometimes doubt if I have ever been really attached since. Be that as it may, hearing of her marriage several years after was like a thunder-stroke—it nearly choked me—to the horror of my mother and the astonishment and almost incredulity of every body. And it is a phenomenon in my existence (for I was not eight years old) which has puzzled, and will puzzle me to the latest hour of it; and lately, I know not why, the *recollection* (*not* the attachment) has recurred as forcibly as ever. I wonder if she can have the least remembrance of it or me? or remember pitying her sister Helen for not having an admirer too?

12: BLJ VII 230; letter to Murray, November 9th 1820.

13: See for example Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (John Murray, 2002), pp.xii-xiii.

How very pretty is the perfect image of her in my memory—her brown, dark hair, and hazel eyes; her very dress! I should be quite grieved to see *her now*; the reality, however beautiful, would destroy, or at least confuse, the features of the lovely Peri which then existed in her, and still lives in my imagination, at the distance of more than sixteen years.¹⁴

It's obvious that Mary Duff inspired a degree of boyish idealisation which his later heterosexual loves didn't.

His best-documented same-sex infatuation was for the Trinity College choirboy John Edleston. For evidence of this we have Byron's own letters to Elizabeth Pigot:

... at this moment I write with a bottle of Claret in my Head, & tears in my eyes, for I have just parted from "my Cornelian" who spent the evening with me; as it was our last Interview, I postponed my engagements to devote the hours of the Sabbath to friendship, Edleston & I have separated for the present, & my mind is a Chaos of hope & Sorrow. – Tomorrow I set out for London, you will address your answer to "Gordon's Hotel" Albemarle Street, where I sojourn, during my visit to the Metropolis. – I rejoice to hear you are interested in my "protegè", he has been my almost constant associate since October 1805, when I entered Trinity College; <when> his voice {first} attracted my notice, his countenance fixed it, & his manners attached me to him forever, he departs for a mercantile house in Town, in October, & we shall probably not meet, till the expiration of my minority, when I shall leave to his decision, either entering as a Partner through my Interest, or residing with me altogether. Of course he would in his present frame of mind prefer the latter, but he may alter his opinion pre<m/>{vi}ous to that period, however he shall have his choice, I certainly love him more than any human being, & neither time or Distance have had the least effect on my (in general) changeable Disposition. – In short, We shall put Lady E. Butler, & Miss Ponsonby¹⁵ to the Blush, Pylades & Orestes¹⁶ out of countenance, & want nothing but a Catastrophe like Nisus & Euryalus,¹⁷ to give Jonathan & David¹⁸ the "go by". – He certainly is perhaps more attached to me, than even I am in return, during the whole of my residence at Cambridge, we met every day summer & Winter, without passing one tiresome moment, & separated each time with

14: BLJ III 221-2.

15: Lady Eleanor Butler and the Hon. Sarah Ponsonby, the inseparable "Ladies of Llangollen".

16: Inseparable friends in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

17: Inseparable friends in Virgil's *Aeneid*: B. had translated the episode featuring them in *Hours of Idleness*.

18: Biblical. Inseparable friends in the Old Testament: see I Samuel.

increasing Reluctance. I hope you will one day, see us together, he is the only being I esteem, though I like many.¹⁹

Byron's frankness in thus telling of his Platonic love for a man (if that's what it was), to a woman whom he must have known was in love with him herself, may cause us to raise an eyebrow. The need to stir things was always part of his motive in writing.

When Edleston died, Byron had to express his feelings of loss in verse – but, obviously, couldn't do so with complete frankness. He solved the problem by borrowing the ambiguous name “Thyrza” from Solomon Gessner's *The Death of Abel*, and was able to write:

I know not if I could have borne
To see thy beauties fade;
The night that followed such a morn
Had worn a deeper shade:
Thy day without a cloud hath passed
And thou wert lovely to the last;
Extinguished, not decayed;
As stars that shoot along the sky
Shine brightest as they fall from high.²⁰

The last image equates Edleston with Lucifer. Did Byron still love John Edleston as much after his voice had broken?²¹

We hear no more of his passionate male friendships with Englishmen, until his brief meeting with the Earl of Clare on the road between Imola and Bologna in 1821.²² His need for physical satisfaction with males seems indeed to have been more than met by the two-hundred-plus “pl&optCs” he had in Greece. Several letters, for instance, exist to him from William Bankes, all inviting him to come and stay at various British locations: but he seems never to have taken Bankes up on any of them.

Bankes came to stay with him in Venice; but even there, where homosexuality was tolerated (see Jack Gumpert Wasserman's essay below),²³ Byron appears to have kept his orgying straight. The tight-lipped

19: Byron to Elizabeth Pigot, from Trinity College Cambridge, July 5th 1807: text from Newstead Abbey Collection NA 948(k); BLJ I 124-5.

20: *And thou art Dead, as Young and Fair*, st.6.

21: David Hemmings reported that after his voice had broken (on stage, in *The Turn of the Screw*), Benjamin Britten lost interest, and never spoke to him again.

22: BLJ IX 53 and 55.

23: See also Jack Gumpert Wasserman, *Venice and Desire*, *Newstead Byron Society Review*, 2008, p.48.

Shelley, in his famous letter to Peacock, skirts the specification of unnatural acts:

He [*Byron*] allows fathers & mothers to bargain with him for their daughters, & though this is common enough in Italy, yet for an Englishman to encourage such sickening vice is a melancholy thing. He associates with wretches who seem almost to have lost the gait & phisiognomy of man, & do not scruple to avow practices which are not only not named but I believe seldom even conceived in England. He says he dissaproves, but he endures.²⁴

Notice that, according to Shelley, at least (he may be being polite) it's the malformed wretches who avow the inconceivable, not Byron.

It's important to understand what happened to men if they were caught performing "unnatural acts" in England before and in Byron's day:

Meanwhile, pilloryings continued, with much brutality and occasional deaths. In 1780, an exceptionally grim episode led a famous member of Parliament to utter a unique protest. On April 10 of that year, a coachman named William Smith and a plasterer named Theodosius Reed had been exposed in the pillory at St. Margaret's Hill in London for attempted sodomy. Though their punishment did not take place until nearly noon, nevertheless, according to one newspaper: "A vast Concourse of People had assembled upon the Occasion, many by Seven o'Clock in the Morning, who had collected dead Dogs, Cats, &c. in great Abundance, which were plentifully thrown at them; but some Person threw a Stone, and hit the Coachman on the Forehead, and he immediately dropped on his Knees, and was to all Appearance dead." Smith did, in fact, die though there was some uncertainty whether the cause of his death was the violence of the crowd or the tightness of the pillory about his neck. Edmund Burke, learning of the case the next day, was moved to expostulate in the House of Commons:

He said, the matter which had induced him to make these reflections was the perusal of a melancholy circumstance stated in the newspapers of that morning. . . . The relation he alluded to, was that of the unhappy and horrid murder of a poor wretch, condemned to stand in the pillory the preceding day. The account stated that two men (Reed and Smith) had been doomed to this punishment; that one of them being short of stature, and remarkably shortnecked, he could not reach the hole made for the admission of the head, in the awkward and ugly instrument used in this mode of punishment; that the officers of justice, nevertheless,

forced his head through the hole, and the poor wretch hung rather than walked as the pillory turned round: that previous to his being put in, he had deprecated the vengeance of the mob, and begged that mercy, which from their exasperation at his crime, and their want of considering the consequences of their cruelty, they seemed very little to bestow. That he soon grew black in the face and the blood forced itself out of his nostrils, his eyes, and his ears. That the mob, nevertheless, attacked him and his fellow criminal with great fury. That the officers seeing his situation, opened the pillory, and the poor wretch fell down dead on the stand of the instrument. The other man, he understood was so maimed and hurt by what had been thrown at him, that he now lay without hope of recovery.”²⁵

Such things are all we need to know when considering why no man ever “came out” at that time. Fearful that his letters would be opened, C.S. Matthews had to take refuge behind a façade of pretended horror. He writes to Byron, on January 13th 1811:

... the grand feature, I take it, in the last year of our history, is the enormous increase of Παιδεραστία²⁶ (that damn’d vice). Good God! were the good old times of Sodom & Gomorrah to return, fire not water w^d. be the Englishman’s element. At no place or time I suppose, since ye creation of the world, has Sodomy been so rife. With your friends the Turcomans to be sure it’s value (compared with fornication) is as 5 to 2. But that w^{ch}. you get for 5£ we must risque our necks for; and are content to risque them. Your Lordship’s delicacy w^d. I know be shocked by the pillorification (in ye HayM.) of a club of gents who were wont to meet in Vere Street (S^t. Clement’s)²⁷ – how all London was in an uproar on that day, & how ye said gents were bemired and beordured ... Every Newsp. that one casts one’s eye upon, presents one with some instance. Take a few that just occur to my recollection. – A sandman for pedicating one of his boys. A sailor at Falmouth for forcible ditto of a boy. John Cary Cole, usher of a school, for ditto with some of his pupils, some of the “victims to his brutal passion” being under age of admissibility to take an oath. An officer was s^d. to have cut his throat on a charge of this kind. Lastly I will mention a lieutenant Hepburn, for amusing himself with Thomas White (16), a drummer boy. These two last I saw in Newgate, where they lie under

25: Louis B. Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love* (Faber 1985), pp.31-2. Burke quotation from *Parliamentary History of England*, Hansard 1814, vol. 21, cols. 388-9.

26: “Pederastia”.

27: The Vere Street gang or coterie was a gay group which met originally in Exeter: the term became a generic. For their punishment, see Crompton, op.cit., pp.163-9.

sentence of death. Davies, who accompanied me, agreed with me that the lieutenant's piece was scarcely worth hanging for. there are a few curious circumstances relating to this last affair. Ye lieut. was first smitten in ye Park, employed another drummer boy to bring T.W. to him. T.W., who appears to have been a practised cinæd (ready made to his hand) answered him "that if he wished to do anything with him he had better meet him at a house in Vere Street". And the constupration actually appears to have taken place in ye very room where the above mentioned friends were dining, nor does s^d Hepⁿ. appear to have at all regarded them. We also saw Pol Fox and Pol Lane (two of the Vere St. coterie) Such is the depraved state of our island.²⁸

Matthews' horror, motivated in reality by the thought that this could easily happen to him, would be Byron's too. While a prisoner in Newgate in late 1819 (an incarceration which Byron mocked), Hobhouse recorded the following in his diary:

A man was hanged this morning for an unnatural crime – I had my windows fastened up, but could not sleep – they begun putting up the scaffold at four o'clock – the tolling of the bell at eight was frightful – I heard the crash of the drop falling and a woman screech violently at the same moment – instantly afterwards the sound of the pye-man crying "all hot all hot" – 'Tis dreadful hanging a man for this nastiness. There are two, a man and boy, now in jail who were caught *in flagrante delictu* – and yet only sentenced to two years imprisonment. The poor wretch was half dead so they told me before he was hanged –²⁹

In the east, things were different. To Henry Drury on June 25th 1809 – just prior to embarkation – Byron gave as one of his reasons for his Mediterranean eastern travels the ambition to contribute to Hobhouse's proposed book ...

... a chapter on the state of morals, and a further treatise on the same to be entitled "Sodomy simplified or Pæderasty proved to be praiseworthy from ancient authors and from modern practice." – Hobhouse further hopes to indemnify himself in Turkey for a life of exemplary chastity at home by letting out his "fayre body" to the whole Divan.³⁰

Hobhouse's "exemplary chastity" consisted in a persistent absence of sexual success, except of the street-corner sort for which he had to pay,

28: C. S. Matthews to Byron, January 13th 1811; text from NLS Ms.43484.

29: BL.Add.Mss.56541.

30: BLJ I 208.

and of which his diary provides numerous examples, always with the price punctiliously noted next to them. In order to prostitute himself to “the whole Divan” (that is, the Turkish Cabinet: supposing that any of them would have been interested), Hobhouse would have to overcome his short stature, his big nose, his plainness, and (I surmise), his body-odour: for Hobhouse made small investment in personal hygiene.

It’s worth commenting on how non-heterosexual Byron’s eastern adventures were on both his tours: on his second journey women don’t figure at all (until a local woman comes to lay his corpse out), and on his first journey he rejected sexual overtures from Donna Josepha Beltram in Seville, from Constance Spencer Smith on Malta, and from Teresa Macri (or rather, from Mrs Macri on behalf of Teresa) in Athens.

At the Capuchin Convent in Athens, he realised his dream, and recreated his Harrow homosocial circle, with erotic extras. On August 23rd 1810 he wrote to the (we hope) still stoical Hobhouse:

I am most auspiciously settled in the Convent, which is more commodious than any tenement I have yet occupied, with room for my *suite*, and it is by no means solitary, seeing there is not only “il Padre Abbate” but his “schuola” consisting of six “Regatzi” all my most particular allies. – These Gentlemen being almost (saving Fauvel and Lusieri) my only associates it is but proper their character religion and morals should be described. – Of this goodly company three are Catholics and three are Greeks, which Schismatics I have already set a boxing to the great amusement of the Father who rejoices to see the Catholics conquer. – Their names are, Barthelemi, Giuseppe, *Nicolo*, Yani, and two anonymous at least in my memory. – Of these Barthelemi is a “simplice Fanciullo” according to the account of the Father, whose favourite is Guiseppe who sleeps in the lantern of Demosthenes. – We have nothing but riot from Noon till night. – The first time I mingled with these Sylphs, after about two minutes reconnoitering, the amiable Signor Barthelemi without any previous notice seated himself by me, and after observing by way of compliment, that my “Signoria” was the “più bello” of his English acquaintances saluted me on the left cheek, for which freedom being reproved by Giuseppe, who very properly informed him that I was “μεγαλος”³¹ he told him I was his “φιλος”³² and “by his beard,” he would do so again, adding in reply to the question of “διατι ασπασετε?”³³ you see he laughs, as in good truth I did very heartily. – But my friend as you may easily imagine is *Nicolo*, who by the bye, is my Italian master, and we are already very philosophical. – I am his “Padrone” and his “amico” and the Lord knows what besides, it is

31: “a great lord”.

32: “loved one”.

33: “Why did you kiss him?”

about two hours since that after <telling> {informing} me he was most desirous to follow him (that is me) over the world, he concluded by telling me it was proper for us not only to live but “morire insieme.” – The latter I hope to avoid, as much of the former as he pleases. – I am awakened in the morning by these imps shouting “venite abasso” and the friar gravely observes it is “bisogno bastonare” every body before the studies can possibly commence. – Besides these lads, my suite, to which I have added a Tartar and a youth to look after my two new saddle horses, my suite I say<s>, are very obstreperous and drink skinfuls of Zean wine at 8 paras the oke daily. – Then we have several Albanian women washing in the “giardino” whose hours of relaxation are spent in running pins into Fletcher’s backside. – “Damnata di mi if I have seen such a spettacolo in my way from Viterbo.” – In short what with the women, and the boys, and the suite, we are very disorderly. – But I am vastly happy and childish, and shall have a world of anecdotes for you and the “Citoyen.” – – Intrigue flourishes, the old woman Teresa’s mother was mad enough to imagine I was going to marry the girl, but I have better amusement, Andreas is fooling with Dudu as usual, and Mariana has made a conquest of Dervise Tahiri, Viscillie Fletcher and Sullee my new Tartar have each a mistress, “Vive l’Amour! – –

I am learning Italian, and this day translated an ode of Horace “Exegi monumentum” <into> {into that language} I chatter with every body good or bad and tradute prayers out of the Mass Ritual, but my lessons though very long are sadly interrupted by scamperings and eating fruit and peltings and playings and I am in fact at school again, and make as little improvement now as I did then, my time being wasted in the same way. – However it is too good to last ...³⁴

It was a paradisal experience about which, later, he could only be able to write publicly from behind a cover, “bammimg” and “humming” his readers as was his wont:

’Tis pleasing to be schooled in a strange tongue
 By female lips and eyes – that is I mean –
 When both the teacher and the taught are young,
 As was the case, at least, where I have been –
 They smile so when one’s right, and when one’s wrong
 They smile still more – and then there intervene
 Pressure of hands, perhaps even a chaste kiss –
 I learned the little that I know by this;

That is, some words of Spanish, Turk, and Greek –
 Italian not at all, having no teachers –

Much English I cannot pretend to speak,
 Learning that language chiefly from its preachers –
 Barrow, South, Tillotson, whom Every week
 I study – also Blair – the highest reachers
 Of Eloquence in piety and prose –
 I hate your Poets, so read None of those. – ³⁵

But as we have already seen, he had had at least one “teacher” in Italian: Niccolo Giraud, whose lips had been to him as pleasant, if not more so, than those of Señorita Cordova, who had taught him *a little* Spanish in her father’s box at the Cadiz Opera House.

One incident has led to some speculation (not, to my mind, enough). It was Cecil Y. Lang³⁶ who suggested that Byron (and Hobhouse) were debauched by Ali Pacha and his hyacinths at Tepellen, Albania, in October 1809. This, writes Lang, is encoded into *Don Juan*, in the huge and sickening erotic encounter between Juan and Catherine the Great in Cantos IX and X; though Lang ignores the fact that Byron makes a much clearer reference to his meeting with Ali during his description of Juan’s failed erotic encounter with Gulbeyaz in Canto V (for which, see Bernard Beatty’s essay below). Here a casual reference to Juan’s aristocratic hands brings forth the following preciosity:

Note: There is perhaps nothing more distinctive of birth than the hand – it is almost the only sign of blood which the Aristocracy can generate. – I remember a Pacha’s remarking that he knew that a certain Englishman was nobly born – because “he had small ears – small hands, & curling silky hair. – – ³⁷

The “certain Englishman” had been Byron himself.³⁸

If there’s truth in either Lang’s thesis or in my own politicised revision of it,³⁹ then Byron’s obsessive need to confess his unacceptable sexual transgressions (without repenting of them), and to reveal them (without doing so), is seen in his greatest poem, where a homosexual encounter is

35: *Don Juan* II 164-5.

36: Lang, Cecil Y. *Narcissus Jilted: Byron, Don Juan, and the Biographical Imperative*, in *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. McGann, Madison 1985, pp.143-79.

37: DJ V st.106, B.’s note.

38: Byron does not seem to be bamming here: see his letter to his mother at BLJ I 228.

39: See *Nature’s Gentler Errors: Byron, Ali Pasha and the Ionian Islands*, Byron Journal, 1995, pp.22-35.

disguised as either of two heterosexual ones. For *Don Juan*, like the Gnostic Gospels, is not in its essence a text for the public:

The grand Arcanum's not for men to see all;
My Music hath some mystic diapasons,
And there is much which could not be appreciated
In any manner by the uninitiated. –⁴⁰

Hobhouse would have been the only reader so initiated: but, after seeing the first five Cantos of *Don Juan* through the press, Hobhouse didn't like to read it – still less think about its subtexts.

Byron's homosexuality was of the regressive, sentimental, not of the voracious, sort. It was partly in pursuit of the phantom which he had glimpsed at Harrow, and briefly embraced at Athens, that he went to Greece in 1823 – and, in the person of Loukas Chalandritsanos, that he imagined he had rediscovered it. But Loukas' indifference contributed, together with the unideal reality of Greece itself, to his depression, and to the lowering of his resistance: and his doctors did the rest.

That is to anticipate. Between Niccolo Giraud and Loukas Chalandritsanos Byron had affairs of all degrees of intensity and duration with women too numerous to count. They included a relaxed one with Lady Oxford, an intense and annoying one with Caroline Lamb, and – often overlooked – the agony of being rejected by the Welsh servant girl Susan Vaughan, who seems alone among Byron's women in having been unfaithful to him – and not just with anybody, but with his own servant Robert Rushton, who was rumoured to have been another of his male lovers. Not all think so; but see this, from Hobhouse's diary:

Thursday January 15th 1830: reading Moore [*the new Life of Byron*] – he has managed with much adroitness to make such mention of me as I can hardly quarrel with even although the general result is rather unsatisfactory than otherwise – as to Byron's character he has on the whole portrayed it fairly – The most unjust of his conclusions is that B's irregularities both in conduct & opinion are chiefly to be ascribed to his college associates – Certainly B had nothing to learn in the way of depravity either of mind or body when he came from Harrow – nor was his Southwell recreations such as Moore pretends them to have been – I have Byron's own word for his innocent amusements there – A great deal of stress is laid on the influence of Matthews (Charles S) on Byron's opinions – I do not believe he had any – if he had that influence related more to practical debauchery than to metaphysical conjectures – Moore has dilated on B's unequal friendships –

such as for Eddlestone & Rushton – he little knows the ground he treads – walk & evening at home –⁴¹

Whatever the case with Rushton, Susan Vaughan's passion, when she learned that Rushton was about to confess to Byron that he had "touched her forbiddenly," was violent in the extreme. The following recently came to light at Sotheby's:

... she descended from her apartment "fierce as ten furies" attacked R. till he was covered with *blood*, tried to throw herself into one of the filthy pieces of water in & about the premises, & when the letters came away, was still threatening perdition, "thunder, horror guts & death"... I presume she will rave herself quiet ...⁴²

It is Harold Bloom himself who writes:

He [*Byron*] bewildered and fascinated his contemporaries with a vitality overtly erotic, compounded of narcissism, snobbery, sadomasochism, incest, heterosexual sodomy, homosexuality, what you will.⁴³

I query the sadomasochism.

If Byron confounds truth with fiction, art with reality or history with imagination, (an error which Harold Bloom himself obviously delights in skirting), it parallels the way he confounds the sexes in so many of his poems: which is a further parallel to the way in which he confounded them in life: as Gibbon reports was rumoured of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Copronymous, "His lust disdained the eternal distinctions of sex", if not, as was said to be the case with Copronymous, of "species".⁴⁴ Byron's liking for girls such as Caroline Cameron (if 'twas she – Ralph Lloyd-Jones queries the idea below) and Caroline Lamb, who were happy to cross-dress for him, is well-attested. In Athens in 1810 Hobhouse even records the poet himself as dragging-up:

41: B.L.Add.Mss.56554.

42: *Books and Manuscripts from the English Library of Archibald, 5th Earl of Rosebery and Midlothian, K.G., K.T.*, Sotheby's, London, 29 October 2009, lot 19; quoted by kind permission.

43: Harold Bloom, *NYRB* September 24th 2009, p.41.

44: *Gibbon, Decline and Fall*, XLVIII.

Dined – to bed, after Byron’s dressing up in female apparel and my dancing with Demetrius.⁴⁵

But this is a rarity. We never hear of Byron dressing as a woman to please any lady. He leaves that to Don Juan, in Cantos V and VI: and Juan is not a willing transvestite.

One very sexy letter is the one he writes to Mercer Elphinstone, instructing her how to put on his famous Albanian costume. This, he says, she can keep, “as it reminds me of one or two things I don’t wish to remember ...”⁴⁶ Imagining an attractive (and very rich) Englishwoman putting on the elaborate costume, which he secretly associates with a short, fat, middle-aged, sadistic Albanian man and his toyboys, gives him a sense of moral and physical refreshment.

“In Whig Society”

A passage from one chaste work to which Byron draws our attention in the first canto of *Don Juan* concerns Eve in *Paradise Lost*. It goes as follows:

The domestic arrangements of such a woman as filled the capacious mind of the poet resemble, if I may say it without profaneness, those of Providence, whose under-agent she is. Her wisdom is seen in its effects. Indeed it is rather felt than seen. It is sensibly acknowledged in the peace, the happiness, the virtue of the component parts; in the order, regularity and beauty of the whole system, of which she is the moving spring. The perfection of her character, as the divine poet intimates, does not arise from a prominent quality, or a showy talent, or a brilliant accomplishment, but it is the beautiful combination and result of them all. Her excellencies consist not so much in acts as in habits, in

Those thousand decencies which daily flow from all her words and actions.

A description more calculated than any I ever met with to convey an idea of the purest conduct resulting from the best principles. It gives an image of that tranquillity, smoothness, and quiet beauty, which is the very essence of perfection in a wife; while the happily chosen verb *flow* takes away any impression of dullness, or stagnant torpor, which the *still* idea might

45: BL.Add.Mss.56529; Hobhouse diary entry for January 26th 1810.

46: BLJ IV 112-3.