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Predator or Prey?

Truth and Fiction about the Women in Lord Byron's
Life and Work, with particular reference to *Don Juan*

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To my family

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George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Introduction

What would happen if we turned the hackneyed theme of Byron and women around and took a look at women and Byron? In particular, what do they represent in his life and more in general what role did theirs correspond to in the female condition in Europe?

The poet's fame as a heartthrob and womanizer nearly outstrips that of poet. He admired, loved, used, hurt, praised and made fun of women just as much as they did of him. Anne Fleming points out that of the female characters in *Don Juan* 'Somewhere present in them is Byron's whole experience of the other sex, from the patrician Lady Oxford to the plebeian Fornarina, from the neurotic Caro Lamb to placid Teresa Guiccioli. One thing is common to the experience of both Don Juan and his creator – that for both of them it is woman who is the predator not the prey.'¹ How true is this statement? Was he really the hunted and not the hunter? After all in the poem it is said that 'Man [...] like the shark and tiger must have prey' (*DJ* II, 67).

Listing the large number of lovers Byron had during his lifetime, it would be interesting to find hints in his major works and letters to what his attitude towards women of different nationalities or social extraction was, trying to get a broader view on what it was like to be a woman in the uncertain period between the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The mosaic of contrasting and different events from the French Revolution, through the Napoleonic Wars down to the advent of the Victorian era had deep effects on culture and society, as can be seen in the passage from Enlightenment to Romanticism in literature and a changing attitude towards many aspects of everyday life and the condition of women.

There is no such thing as *the* woman of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Every single individual is different as regards education, social status and personality, varying also on the basis of national influences. However, there are some points in common. Historians contemplate single cases to get a general idea, often drawing from literature such as diaries, letters, newspapers and novels. In Byron's works and correspondence we get a fairly complete image of the situation of women of different extraction and temper, in England as well as in Italy. Every lady represents a part of what being a female in those days was like; considering them individually we will be able to get an exhaustive overview on the whole range of

¹ Anne Fleming: *Bright Darkness – The Poetry of Lord Byron Presented in the Context of his Life & Times*, p. 154.

opportunities a woman had, which was thus summarized by Byron (talking partly about his own experience as will be seen):

Some take a lover; some take drams or prayers,
Some mind their household, others dissipation,
Some run away and but exchange their cares,
Losing the advantage of a virtuous situation.
Few changes e'er can better their affairs,
Theirs being an unnatural situation,
From the dull palace to the dirty hovel.
Some play the devil, and they write a novel.
(*Don Juan* Canto II, 201)

For England six ladies will be taken into consideration, in descending order of power and influence over the poet. Not the power of love but the actual legal power of the women surrounding him, in an era when feminism was just starting to develop. After a close analysis of their lives and their influence on Byron, a more general overview on the changing models of relationship in the era of Libertinism will be given, going from England to Italy. It will be argued that although the common belief was that English women had more freedom, Catholic countries were more indulgent in some instances, such as the keeping of a *cavalier servente*, than Great Britain was, despite its modern laws. This may be the reason that led to the development of the figure of the Libertine in southern countries, even though seduction and extra-marital relationships were widespread also in the north. Byron enjoyed the Italian ease and freedom after his excessively complicated and intriguing English mistresses, whom he nonetheless sincerely loved. In this sense he cannot be really called a libertine, as his affairs with Italian women show as well, since there was always some feeling involved. His three Italian lovers will be introduced, again according to their status and importance in Byron's life but this time in ascending order of importance on the poet's life. Interestingly the choice of his lovers in Italy mirrors his mistresses in England in an opposite manner. While in his home country the suddenly famous young man attracted noble and powerful women and ended with a comparatively poor and helpless girl, in Italy it was exactly the other way round. He was entangled first with women of the middle or lower class until he more or less settled down with a noblewoman, who had a great power over his heart.

In the second part of the work, the biographical knowledge of Byron's predatory prey will make it easier to recognize them as models for his works, in particular *Don Juan*, where he takes up the theme by saying that:

A tigress robbed of young, a lioness,
Or any interesting beast of prey,

Are similes at hand for the distress
Of ladies who cannot have their own way;
(*DJV*, 132)

The poet followed his definition of poetry as 'mirror of life, the passions is actions' quite faithfully and drew from personal experience as much as from literature, or even more, to re-elaborate it as universal material for his poems. E. French Boyd rightly affirms that 'none of Juan's love episodes is for Byron strictly autobiographical, but the whole story contains his explanation of the havoc wrought in his life by love affairs and the ruin of his reputation.'² The whole archetype of the treacherous libertine is changed into a gentle, tender-hearted youth, forever seduced by predatory women who want to have their own way, rather than a seducing Juan. This reflects once more how Byron felt love and represented it in his masterpiece. Still, Pope's maxim 'Every woman is at heart a rake', which may have influenced the poet, is not perfectly true, since behind his critical sarcasm, he really sympathised with the 'weaker sex'. Though sexually strong, it was socially inferior and indeed rather prey of the male-ruled system in England as well as in the rest of Europe. The figure of the libertine hero is as false and affected by prejudice as the predatory woman, since actually both were rather exceptional in the strict and hypocritical society of the time, which did not allow the excessive freedom they were accused of. Neither predator nor prey but something in between, that is what Byron and his lovers, Juan and the other fictional heroines were.

His representation of reality, though comic, is much more realistic and is stripped of the masks society loved to wear. The theme of the truth in masquerade, analysed in the last part of this work, can be well inserted in the discussion about predator and prey since it shows how Byron himself was a prey to society and its expectations, victim of the myth he had created, the same way women were falsely considered predatory. Tired of having to live up to everyone's ideal image of the Byronic hero and of the disgusting hypocrisy which had at first hailed and then condemned him, the poet tried to get rid of all deceitfulness in *Don Juan*, masking the people he knew as characters to unmask the truth. He was helped in this enterprise by his position as an outsider in Italy and by his excellent use of *ottava rima*, which proved the ideal form for his frank, witty writing.

Looking behind the fairly recognizable fictional elements Byron used to turn reality around him into serious satire, we will not only detect aspects of persons, and especially women, gravitating around his existence, but also achieve a more complete vision on eighteenth-century life and poetry and on Byron himself.

² Elizabeth French Boyd: *Byron's Don Juan*, p. 70.

1. The Discovery of Europe through the Grand Tour

First of all, Byron's life-long relationship with women deepened immediately before and even more after his travel to the continent. The custom of sending wealthy young men of the upper classes to discover Europe through the Grand Tour of Holland, Germany, Italy, and France as a completion of their University studies had been common since the seventeenth century. As Iris Origo points out, the travellers of that century differed from Byron's contemporaries since the early Grand Tourists were mainly aristocrats who saw travel as a prerogative of their class, interacting nearly exclusively with other aristocrats of the visited countries. Completely different was the perception of middle-class intellectuals, the so called 'Romantics' who started to appear in the eighteenth century. They sought the beauties of Nature corresponding to their world within, which satiated them to the point that they did not wish for any human contact, especially with locals, apart from servants or mistresses. This attitude did not make British travellers beloved abroad, since they preferred to stay out of the limelight and could be judged by the foreign audience only by their curious behaviour.

Moreover, for most of the youths it was not only a geographical and cultural discovery, but also a sexual initiation, as was expected at the time. While a girl absolutely had to be a virgin before marrying, there were various opportunities to get some experience for young men before settling, especially abroad. Nonetheless the public attitude towards sexual adventure in foreign countries was generally unfavourable, mainly due to the threat of venereal diseases, the consequences of which could be very serious not only from the point of individual health but also because it harmed the chances of securing heirs. Although this risk was present in England as well, some countries in particular had the reputation of being particularly dangerous because the heat of their climate influenced the passions of its inhabitants - Spanish as well as Italian women were said to be excessively fiery, despite the stricter sexual control exercised by the Catholic Church. Philip Francis observed that 'In England the commerce between the sexes is either passion or pleasure; in France it is gallantry, sentiment or intrigue; in Italy it is dull insipid *business*.'³ In spite of this description, many British tourists found their time there far from dull since Italy was notorious for prostitution, especially Venice whose courtesans were reputed for their skill.

Byron certainly knew and appreciated the beauty and sexual willingness of Mediterranean maids (and boys, but his homosexual affairs will not be dealt with in this work) such as the girl of Cadiz or the maid of Athens, who are only a few examples enumerated in the first two cantos of

³ Black: *The British Abroad – The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth century*, p. 211.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Due to the Napoleonic wars, visiting continental Europe was difficult or even impossible. That is why the poet organized a tour through different parts of the Mediterranean world and the exotic near East, which as his works prove always fascinated him. Travelling through Portugal, Spain, Albania and Greece, 21-year-old Byron noticed with pleasure that the dark eyed, mysterious women he met there were more open to the game of passionate and not only coquettish love than the ones he had already got to know in England.

Our English maids are long to woo
And frigid even in possession,
And if their charms be fair to view,
Their lips are slow at Love's confession,
But born beneath a brighter Sun
For love ordained the Spanish maid is [...]
(CH I, *The Girl of Cadiz III*)

His partiality towards foreign women was evident. Alan Massie⁴ underlines how the youth was impressed and delighted by their freedom of manners and conversation, observing with approval how married women were accustomed to throw off all conventional restraint. 'If you make a proposal which in England would bring you a box on the ear from the meekest of virgins to a Spanish girl, she thanks you for the honour you intended her, and replies "wait till I am married, & I shall be too happy"' (Letter to his mother, August 11th 1805). Like a modern Odysseus he wandered from one country to another, mostly by sea, reliving in himself as Harold the ancient mythology and literature he learned to appreciate at Harrow and Oxford. Just like the hero of the past, he had at least one lover in each place, either male or female, according to the willingness and customs of the different inhabitants. The Spanish girls he considered the most beautiful, while in Greece, apart from Teresa Macri and her sisters, the divinities all under fifteen he was 'dying for love' for, he preferred the boys 'resembling the busts of Alcibiades' to the 'not quite so handsome' women (Letters to Henry Drury, May 3rd, 1810). About the Turkish and oriental beauties he had less to say, they were hidden from his eyes and could be only dreamed of.

Byron's first conquests abroad marked the beginning of his lifelong relationship with the gentle sex. His beauty and charm fascinated English as well as Mediterranean women and he praised them in his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which would make him so famous all over Europe in a year's time. Helped by his roaring success and the myth that started to build up around his life, as soon as he got back to England the number of his female admirers grew rapidly, including

⁴ Alan Massie: *Byron's Travels*, p. 31.

famous and eccentric noblewomen such as Caroline Lamb and the Lady Oxford. As David Cecil describes it:

Childe Harold [...] hit the taste of the time. And still more did the personality behind it; the figure of the author who, melancholic, detached and scornful, his heart turned to marble by a career of sin and sightseeing in every part of Europe, stood out in melodramatic silhouette against the sublimities of nature and the wreckage of empires. Besides, he was a lord, and, it was rumoured, as beautiful as an angel: such a lion had not appeared in London within living memory. P. 159

Forgotten were his shy clumsiness and stoutness as well as the unhappy passions he had experienced as a teenager, not even his detested club-foot was a hindrance to his becoming the lion of the season. Through the success of his poetry and his good looks he was able to lead the life he had always dreamt of. He enjoyed boundless reverence and admiration for three years, slowly turning into the opposite version of himself, that of the Byronic hero he wanted to impose on the world. Quennell defines him as a Romantic *malgré lui* as he despised Romanticism but, thanks to his peculiar sense of self-awareness, his life crystallized many important aspects of the Romantic genius. Fundamentally Byron had a 'robust eighteenth century mocking kind of outlook. But the romantic attitude, by the scope it gave for individual self-glorification, gratified his egotism'⁵ and helped him to mask his torturing shyness, which he defined as 'naturally inherent in my Disposition' (letter to Augusta, March 22nd, 1804). The numerous love-affairs helped his self-esteem, though at heart he always longed for a more retired life, as he recollected later:

I doubt sometimes whether, after all, a quiet and unagitated life would have suited me: yet sometimes I long for it. My earliest dreams (as most boys' dreams) were martial; but a little later they were all for *love* and retirement, till the hopeless attachment to M.C. [Mary Chaworth] began, and continued [...] very early in my teens.⁶

This entry in his journal presents his change of wishes from martial to marital and later to the contrary of a retired life as influenced by women, not his own choice. Had he not fallen in love so early, had he not met and married after a large number of adventures, had his divorce not caused his exile to Italy, his whole life might have been less agitated, he mused. Yet it is impossible to imagine Byron without women, he himself never did or could. It all came as it had to come. As was expected at a certain age and with the intention of settling, in 1815 he married the rich heiress Annabella Milbanke, whom he divorced just one year later, after the birth of their daughter Ada. The reasons for this breakup were numerous; it was doubtlessly difficult to live with a notorious rascal and womanizer, who openly betrayed, insulted and mistreated his too delicate and morally impeccable wife. She eventually gave up on the idea of redeeming him and fled with her daughter. Though the poet was strongly against the dissolution of their

⁵ David Cecil: *The Young Melbourne and the Story of his Marriage to Lady Caroline Lamb*, p.160.

⁶ Byron: *Detached Thoughts* 34, October 15th, 1821.

marriage, the motives listed in the divorce act included also a not specified 'other', which scared Byron and made him finally yield to the request but never admit his faults. Probably he feared Annabella might allude to his incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, from whom, it was rumoured, he had had a daughter, Medora. The sense of guilt for this love always haunted him and to avoid further scandals after his dramatic divorce, he self-exiled himself, tired of that society which, after fêting him in 1812 treated him so coolly in 1816. His abhorrence of its canting and hypocritical morality became the basis for *Don Juan* in later years. In search of something new and unspoilt he travelled through Switzerland, where he dreamed of Rousseau's *Heloise*, and Italy. We can read his considerations, which were romantically literary and historic rather than erotic, in the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*.

As Lady Blessington described it, he left 'England, - the climate, modes and customs of which had never been congenial to his taste, - to seek beneath the sunny skies of Italy, and all the soul exciting objects that classic land can offer, a consolation for domestic disappointment. How soon were the broken ties of conjugal affection replaced by less holy ones!' ⁷ Indeed, the women of his life, Annabella, Augusta and Ada never left him; he remembered them constantly in his poems with mixed feelings; 'my child, my wife, my sister' are said to have been his last words. Nonetheless, he found ample consolation in the arms of Dutch, Swiss and Italian women. By the time he settled in Venice, he had already impregnated Mary Shelley's half-sister, Claire Clairmont, who admired him and was related to his close friend Percy Shelley, and had had all sorts of 'degrading affairs' ⁸. When he boasted of having possessed all the prostitutes of Venice, it appears evident that he was trying to live up to the myth of seducer and indomitable Romantic hero that surrounded him, acting precisely as was expected from his audience. Despite often fighting against his tendency to stoutness and the pain caused by his hated club-foot, he always showed that 'a man is a man' (Letter to Kinnaird, January 20th, 1817), whether there was love involved or not. And Italy was the best place to do it, according to Byron's own ironic words:

With all its sinful doings, I must say
That Italy's a pleasant place to me.
(*Beppo* XLI)

Ever since his travels as a youth, before his marriage but already tired of the opportunities offered by his country, he had dreamt of living abroad where he felt more at ease, as he wrote in his journal, not knowing it would happen exactly as he had predicted:

⁷ *Lady Blessington's Conversations* p. 60

⁸ *LBC* p. 60

My hopes are limited to [...] settling either in Italy or the East (rather the last), and drinking deep of the languages and the literature of both. Past events have unnerved me; and all I can now do is to make life an amusement, and look on while others play. (November 1813).

It turned out to be at first in Italy, 'his magnet', and later in Greece and the East, where the poet could drink of the culture and amuse himself, playing parts and observing the theatre of life. For several years after his arrival, he was essentially a tourist in Italy. Massie points out he 'enjoyed the foreigner's sense of irresponsibility, which is, of course, one of the major attractions of living abroad. Italy provided a backcloth for his life, but it did not matter to him as London and England did.'⁹ His thoughts remained there while his muses changed and Venice captured him with its decaying pomp, beauty, gloom, gaiety and its rich historical and literary associations. Most of all, however, for the publicly accepted custom for married women of all classes of having 'amorosi'. Marianna, La Fornarina, Teresa Guiccioli and others found a place in his heart and letters just like his English mistresses had done, inspiring him in a double way. On the one hand their beauty and sweet language excited his mind and were made eternal by his verses or he made fun of their bad behaviours mocking them in poetry; on the other hand, women were his principal readers and the principal creators and consumers of the Byronic myth, it was to please them he claimed to write. Just as in England, he enjoyed the company of young married girls, particularly praising Italian freedom, though like Juan, he had actually

[...] resolved that he should travel through
All European climes by land or sea,
To mend his former morals or get new,
Especially in France and Italy
(At least this is the thing most people do).
(*DJ I*, 191)

He did not really mend his morals but studied foreign customs as well as those he knew from his home-country amply, giving us the opportunity to reflect on different aspects. What were the differences and the similarities between English and Italian women at the time? Did they have the same kind of education, freedom and rights? To what extent was Protestant and always innovative Britain ahead or behind the Mediterranean culture? After all, Venice was famous for its vicious Carnevale and the home city of the renowned seducer Casanova, while Spain is where Byron set his revision of the legend of *Don Juan*, the greatest libertine of all times. Were experiences like theirs not to be had in England? Byron's most important women represent different attitudes towards love and the culture of their country and time and only by analysing them individually, can we get a more precise answer to these questions and perhaps revise some of the prejudices against the poet's alleged ill-treatment in real life and fiction of his

⁹ Massie, p. 92.

female prey, who in some way owe to him as much as he did to them. They inspired him, he made them eternal. Indeed, we might confirm Margot Strickland's statement: 'it is unlikely that [these women] would be much remembered were it not for him, and it is a measure of his multi-faceted brilliance that they should all be so different.'¹⁰

¹⁰ Strickland: *Byron's women*, p. 9.

2. English women

2.1. Lady Blessington's *Conversations of Lord Byron*



We get plenty of useful first- and second-hand information about Byron's lovers and English as well as Italian women in general from an extraordinary lady and friend of the poet – Lady Blessington. In her *Conversations of Lord Byron*, published in 1834, we are introduced to the poet's feelings and ideas under a new light, with her feminine comments and interpretations. Actually 'the most gorgeous Lady Blessington' became the only woman to report the poet's conversation at great length. According to Sir John Murray, 'of all the ladies with whom Byron associated, she was perhaps the one best suited by her charm, her good sense, her intelligence, and her sympathy to be a companion of Byron if they had met in earlier years: had she been destined to be his wife his whole career would have been changed.'¹¹ However, this was not their destiny and maybe it was best that they never had an affair since that would have hindered their deep friendship at least according to Byron's peculiar maxim: 'a man and a woman can make far better friendship than can exist between two of the same sex, but *then* with this condition that they never have made or are to make love with each other.'¹² This condition she fulfilled and became his confidante with a touch of erotic attraction she always exerted.

The younger daughter of Mr Edmund Power of Ireland, a gentleman of good fortune, reckless habits and little fortune, she was married to Captain Farmer at the age of fifteen and divorced on the grounds of drunkenness, ill-treatment and insanity. She lived by herself as a mistress until he tragically died a few years later. Four months afterwards the attractive lady was the respectable wife of the Earl of Blessington. Turning from poor widow of obscure origin to powerful, intellectual and wealthy Countess, Marguerite Powers knew all conditions a woman

¹¹ *LBC* p. 3.

¹² *LBC* p. 51.

could be in very well. That is why her comments are so important to describe the female influences on Byron's life in England as well as in Italy, where she met him in 1823.

Apart from being almost the same age, they had many other things in common, which made their personalities blend so harmoniously: both had been painfully aware from a tender age of their noble connections, had been introspective and imaginative children and became attentive observers of nature, human feelings and society at a more mature age. In London they had moved in very much the same masculine society, though in different periods, shared their literary tastes and were subjects of the hostile comment and ostracism by the exponents of the new respectability, as John Jump¹³ calls it. In fact, as a consequence of that, they both escaped to the Continent in search of a less confined society, tired of living under the weight of their fame and disgusted by the gossip around them. As Byron says about Haidée and Juan in *Don Juan* despite their efforts 'They were / Unfit to mix in these thick solitudes / Called social, haunts of hate and vice and care' (*DJ* IV, 28). Indeed, no well-born lady ever forgot where Lady Blessington came from, as we can read in a letter of advice Lady Hardy sent Byron on June 17th, 1823, in order to warn him against forming compromising acquaintances:

I believe she began life as the lady fair in a most humble occasional way at Cahir [...] and supplied the absence of the lawful lady, she then succeeded in the usual routine of that life till she found the present lord in deep despair at his first wife's death who thought what is called in England a *Naughty Woman*, was I believe as near an Angel as possible. [...] she was an example to other women of every high and noble feeling though she had lived as Lord Mountjoy's Mistress for two years before he married her (*LBC* p. 62).

Her past could not be forgotten although she did her best to be an irreproachable wife and gentlewoman - despite her dislike of her husband's weakness - interested in all aspects of culture, art and morally acceptable behaviours. Being a highly accomplished and sensitive writer, Lady Blessington published her impressions of her personal Grand Tour following the steps of her much admired Byron, on whom she was an expert, in *Idler in Italy* (published in 1839-40). Although she believed she knew everything about him and understood him better than others, when she actually met the poet himself she was rather disappointed as he did not live up to her expectation of a Romantic hero. What she recollects may have been the same experience many others had, who were too prejudiced from his works to appreciate the real Byron.

The impressions of the first few minutes disappointed me, as I had, both from the portraits and descriptions give, conceived a different idea of him. I had fancied him taller, with a more dignified and commanding air; and I looked in vain for the hero-looking sort of person with whom I had so long identified him in imagination. (*LBC* p. 5)

¹³ John Jump: *Byron*, p. 43.

He was far too lively to be Childe Harold or, as she found out later when she got to know him better, annoying for his tendency to lament and whine about his fate in front of strangers and mostly for his excessive partiality towards Italy. She had been living in the country for a shorter period than he and, although acknowledging his superiority on that point and being disgusted herself by the hypocrisy of the English upper-class, she found it amusing to contradict and challenge him. Their mock-arguments give us a good view on how Italian and English women were perceived at the time by a male and a female member of the upper-class who had chosen to become bystanders in exile for a while.

Their reasons to draw away from England were different, but what united them was their having had enough of being constantly judged for their conduct by the few narrow-minded gentlemen and ladies who ruled over society. Lady Blessington, being a woman, was condemned mainly by other women for her obscure past – she could act virtuous but never become respectable. Byron, on the other hand, like so many other followers of the French Revolution, was criticized more harshly by men and especially politicians, whom he knew well from the Chamber of Lords. The French Revolution found less resonance in England than in other European countries, given that it had always been an innovative but also highly traditional nation. The new opinions about the rights of man and democracy were a taboo among Tories and Whigs, but the young aristocrats, the *jeunesse dorée*, followed them as a sort of fashion in spite of the old moralists. This icy morality, more pure than snow, distinguished between actions and thoughts. Libertinism, gambling or drinking were good form compared to expressing radical opinions in favour of the Revolution. Outspoken critics of religion, manners and politics such as Byron outraged the smug British gentry. Sydney Smith says of the time ‘it was an awful period for anyone who ventured to maintain liberal opinions. He was sure to be assailed with all the billingsgate of the French Revolution. “Jacobin”, “Atheist” and “Regicide” were the gentlest terms used, and any man who breathed a syllable against the senseless bigotry of the two Georges was shunned as unfit for social life.’¹⁴ It was implacable intolerance that condemned Godwin’s free notions of marriage and government, Mary Wollstonecraft’s advocacy for the rights of woman and later Byron, Shelley and other brilliant intellectuals of the time, who could express their ideas only abroad and to the detriment of their reputation.

Free from those moral restraints, unconventional spirits like Lady Blessington and Byron could meet, talk and act more freely than in their home country. They evidently found each other friendly and sympathetic, and their brief relationship even acquired a slightly romantic tinge. Lady Blessington, who had been away from her home country for less time, noticed how

¹⁴ Armistead Gordon: *Allegra – The Story of Byron and Miss Clairmont*, p. 52.

'Un-English' Byron was becoming. His manners were still like in 1816, more licentious and less stern than when she left; and his extravagant style might have passed without remark in a foreign nobleman but not in a British peer of the realm. Following his 'southern' ease, she rejoiced in making Teresa jealous of her intimacy with the poet, with whom she used to take long rides in Genoa, talking about their English acquaintances in common and comparing their life-style with the Italian one, which he always praised as superior:

"The Italians do not understand the English," said Byron, "indeed how can they? For they [the Italians] are frank, simple, and open in their natures, following the bent of inclinations, which they do not believe to be wicked; while the English, to conceal the indulgence of theirs, daily practise hypocrisy, falsehood, and uncharitableness; so that to one error is added many crimes" (*LBC* p. 29).

After a few months their friendship ended because of Teresa's jealousy, Byron's departure for Greece and his repugnance at some of Lady Blessington's patterns of behaviour, which were sometimes frivolous and morally dubious even in his eyes. As a matter of fact, despite her trying as hard as possible to amend her coquettish and intriguing attitudes of her past as mistress, there were rumours about her having an affair with her step-daughter's husband-to-be and also her intimacy with Byron was starting to be gossiped about. She felt the affront of being abandoned by a man she deemed superior to slander, and avenged herself once again in a very un-ladylike manner, telling Teresa that Byron had gone to Greece to get rid of her and her Italian relatives. Although it might have been partly true, since even Mary Shelley had noticed how Teresa's 'unamiable jealousies and falsehoods have destroyed what remained of affection in his heart,'¹⁵ it was cruel of her.

She was a woman with feelings and a little malice after all. However, her exceptional situation in life brought her from being an ill-treated poor widow to high-class mistress and finally to legally and socially accepted wife of her former aristocratic lover. These circumstances, which were not too uncommon at the time but still required great tact and strength to be endured, certainly made her an extraordinary companion to the poet in distress and a source about English and Italian society for us, since she knew most of the important figures of her days personally or by fame, including Byron's wife and lovers.

¹⁵ *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, p. 21.

2.2. Annabella Milbanke



Anne Isabella, usually called Annabella, Milbanke, the virtuous and prude blue-stocking, only wife of Lord Byron, represents the classical upper-class wife of the eighteenth century – prudish, delicate, cultivated, subjected to her relatives (the whole matrimonial transaction was controlled by her aunt Lady Melbourne, with whom Byron had an active correspondence) and still untouched by Romantic ideals such as eternal love surpassing social barriers. It seems that even the idea of companionate marriage expressed by L. Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* was not yet rooted in her wishes. From the first she felt attracted by that damned hero image of Byron she had internalized after reading *Childe Harold* but she was too proud to throw herself in his way as most of the fashionable coquettes were doing. In March 1812 she wrote in her diary:

I did not seek an introduction to him, for all the women were absurdly courting him, and trying to *deserve* the lash of his Satire. I thought that *inoffensiveness* was the most secure conduct, and I am not desirous of a place in his lays. Besides, I cannot worship talents that are unconnected with the love of man, nor be captivated by that Genius which is barren in blessings – so I made no offerings at the shrine of Childe Harold, though I shall not refuse the acquaintance if it comes my way. (Ethel Colburne Mayne p. 37)

It did not come her way until a month later at Lady Melbourne's. Byron remembered the first meeting perfectly, from which the main aspects that struck him with Annabella appear, her superior intellect which made her appear arrogantly conscious of more important matters: 'On entering the room I observed a young lady, more simply dressed than the rest of the assembly, sitting alone upon a sofa. I took her for a humble companion and asked if I was right in my conjecture? "She is a great heiress," said he [Moore] in a whisper that became lower as he proceeded; "you had better marry her, and repair that old place, Newstead."' ¹⁶ A malicious hint alone was not enough to tempt him, there was more. His feelings for her were different and

¹⁶ Medwin p. 32.

deeper than those for his other mistresses – for the first time he felt *esteem* more than attraction for a girl, admiration for her cleverness, amiability and good blood. All these new sentiments together, despite (or because of) the absence of love, made him think of marriage quite from the beginning, since ‘marriage goes on better with esteem and confidence than romance’ (Letter to Lady Melbourne, September 18th, 1812). In this he does not embody the Romantic ideals at all but shows a more rational and old-fashioned idea of marriage, based on social and economic interest and friendship rather than passionate love. Byron knew the erotic side of love very well but appears to limit it to his lighter liaisons, while for a more solid union he wished for something different. And Annabella seemed just the sort of woman he was looking for.

The acquaintance was soon formed and became more intimate. Obsessed with her prim morality against which she measured all whom she met and which was to rule and wreck her life, as Strickland sums up, Annabella abhorred the poet’s philandering habits and obscure past but enjoyed his conversation. Strongly refraining from the lionizing of the notorious profligate, she clung to the conviction that he was ‘sincerely repentant for the evil he has done, though he has no resolution (without aid) to adopt a new course of conduct and feelings.’¹⁷ This aid she was willing to give, at first by vowing ‘in secret to be a devoted friend to this lone being’ and later hoping to redeem and save his lost soul by making him an exemplary friend at first and later wife. This he had seen coming, since he believed women seldom stick to friendship alone and love was the end of friendship.

His motives were less idealistic - he was more interested in a connection to wealthy Lady Melbourne, who pushed him away from her daughter-in-law Caroline Lamb and towards her niece, and in Annabella’s fortune and title (he would later add the name of Noel to his) than in the girl herself. Yet he did admire what she represented and was surprised by her acknowledged virtue and wit: ‘She certainly is a very extraordinary girl; who would imagine so much strength and variety of thought under that placid Countenance?’ he told Caroline Lamb of all people in a letter on May 1st, 1812, who could not believe her plain and boring relative would become her rival. It is true, Annabella was not exceptionally beautiful and her uncommon knowledge of mathematics rather scared him off - ‘She is too good for a fallen spirit to know, and I should like her more if she were less perfect’, he goes on in the same letter to Caroline. In that spring and summer of the Byron Fever Miss Milbanke was the most piquant of changes, behaving so differently from his other admirers. ‘There was a simplicity, a retired modesty about her, which was very characteristic, and formed a happy contrast to the cold artificial formality, and studied

¹⁷ Colburn Mayne: *The Life and Letters of Anne Isabella, Lady Noel Byron*, p. 39.

stiffness, which is called fashion,¹⁸ he explained to Medwin. The sanguine poet loved innocence and shyness in women, although from most of his connections this preference does not appear. Caroline, Lady Oxford and, - his Italian mistresses were far from shy and docile, but actually his deepest attachments were with 'shy antelopes' – Augusta, Annabella and Teresa. However, they could be headstrong too, as he was to find out later on.

Byron kept writing her long, passionate letters, proposing more than once, even after having been rejected, which actually was not too upsetting: 'I congratulate A[nnabella] and myself on our mutual escape. That would have been but a cold collation and I prefer hot suppers.'¹⁹ To hot supper then he turned, embarking in the disastrous liaison with his half-sister Augusta, a deadly sin she might have saved him from. In fact, his first proposal had been made in early autumn 1812, when he was desperately looking for a way out of his 'scrape' with Caroline Lamb. Jump affirms there is no doubt the refusal of the high-minded, demure young woman piqued him; still he proposed to her again in September 1814 when looking for a way out of his even worse 'scrape' with Augusta.

It is hard to say what attracted and 'entrapped' him in that 'icicle of a woman'²⁰, as the Duchess of Devonshire defined her. For some time he really believed she could redeem him and make him a better person, though he was puzzled by the 'rectangular proceedings' of his 'Princess of Parallelograms' and feared they were to be 'two parallel lines prolonged to infinity side by side, but never to meet' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, September 25th, 1812). Moreover, he was well aware of her being far removed from reality because of her upbringing: 'She seems to have been spoiled – not as children usually are – but systematically Clarissa Harlowed [the reference to Richardson's novel is very well-chosen, linking Byron himself to Lovelace] into an awkward kind of correctness, with a dependence upon her own infallibility which will or may lead her into some egregious blunder' - perhaps like attempting to change him? He goes on in a prophesising tone 'she will find exactly what she wants, and then discover that it is much more dignified than entertaining' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, September 5th, 1813). His analysis turned out to be absolutely right, both knew at the bottom of their heart that they were not made for each other, but they did not want to give up. Especially Byron, for whom after the disappointment of being turned down, it became a game of conquest added to the conviction that she was the only woman he could ever marry. It also helped him to get rid of jealous Caroline Lamb, who was

¹⁸ Medwin p. 34.

¹⁹ Fleming p. 168.

²⁰ Margot Strickland: *The Byron Women*, p. 70.

closely related to Miss Milbanke and maliciously predicted that he 'would never pull together with a woman who went to church punctually, understood statistics, and had a bad figure.'²¹

Annabella justly had doubts. On the one hand her aunt Lady Melbourne was pushing her like a *deus ex machina*, with evidently not disinterested eagerness to combine the match; on the other his scandalous relationships with Caroline and Lady Oxford filled the newspapers, but she was resolved to think nothing but good of him and intensified their correspondence. There is something pathetically comical in their letters partly because each was attributing to the other a character which that other was eager to disclaim. He was not the fallen angel waiting for redemption and she was a puzzle to him, since his affairs had mostly been with married women of more relaxed morals.

After long hesitation, pressures from her aunt, vain attempts on Caroline's side to dissuade her and endless letters, she finally yielded under the illusion of changing him. Byron, as she feared when she warned him: 'Don't let me marry you against your will', entered the state of matrimony quite unconvinced - 'never was lover less in haste' wrote Hobhouse - and showed little care for his wife right from the beginning. It is said that during their wedding journey he told her ferociously: 'It *must* come to a separation! You should have married me when I first proposed.'²² He rejoiced in making fun of her and tormenting her, as a revenge for her refusing his first offer, though he could be tender too. Moreover, he had bad presentiments on the day of his nuptials, as he says: 'I was not so young when my father died but that I perfectly remember him, and had very early a horror of matrimony from the sight of domestic broil [...] Something whispered me that I was sealing my own death-warrant.'²³ Did Annabella have the same feeling? After all she was to suffer from that union too, being unable to handle him. Even his faithful servant Fletcher noticed 'that it was strange every woman should be able to manage his Lordship, but her Ladyship!'²⁴ Byron himself knew that his disposition wished to be guided and that his wife 'if she had common sense, would have more power over me than any other whatsoever' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, April 30th, 1814).

Common sense she did not want, but it was not enough. A wife with a lighter and more humorous touch might have preserved harmony by laughing him out of his melodramatic postures, Jump asserts. Annabella was incapable of this. The only child of middle-aged parents she was not used to fighting for what she wanted, i.e. to 'inspire and reform a reckless

²¹ Cecil p. 196.

²² Colburn Mayne p. 160.

²³ *Medwin* p.55.

²⁴ *Medwin* p.134.

eighteenth-century aristocrat who happened to be also a man of genius. Inevitably, she irritated and oppressed him'²⁵ as his sharp-tongued nicknames for her show, like 'my mother of the Gracchi' or 'Desdemona' (Letter to Moore, September 20th, 1814).

Perhaps had they been more in love and not just convincing themselves they were so, they would have overcome the initial difficulties of every marriage. But their love was not enough though it was not the typical purely economic alliance of former ages; he himself declared that his marriage was free from every interested motive which is only partly true since he was well aware of Annabella's good connections, title and fortune. As usual for that time, marriage and love seldom went together - it was not expected to find sexual pleasure in one's legitimate partner, a wife bore heirs and looked after the household, while mistresses or other married ladies provided for the rest. Annabella endured her husband's unfaithfulness, evident partiality to his half-sister and drunkenness patiently, finding consolation in her studies and in her rigid stoicism, a great way of escape for many ill-treated wives.

When not even the birth of their daughter Augusta Ada one year after their marriage managed to change him and his abuses became more violent, also due to the pressure of his creditors, she finally gave up - 'I could have been no good to him'²⁶ - and decided to save at least herself and the child, if she could not save him. She fled from the house back to her father, leaving the details of the divorce to him, just as a good daughter, used to a patriarchal system, was expected to do. The fact that she abandoned her husband was a big step for her - although at the time divorces were common - and she suffered at not being able to stick to her ideal of a good wife. We do not know if she had planned it or if desperation led her to it. She went to her father's house with the excuse of a short visit and never came back. Byron was genuinely surprised, not realizing how intolerable his conduct had been towards a conventionally reared, pregnant girl - there were indistinct rumours of unlawful sexual practices, confessions of homosexuality, his scandalous liaison with Augusta from which he declared a child was the result, debts, drunkenness and a sometimes so erratic behaviour that she thought he might be insane - and remembering mainly their happy moments. He felt betrayed and could not believe she was capable of duplicity, although in their past correspondence he had detected some ambiguity. He tried his best to make her come back but she resisted his pathetic appeals and was confirmed in her decision.

Her personal failure made even clearer what she most wanted now - the security in the possession of her child. In order to obtain the separation and the custody of her daughter she

²⁵ Jump p. 34.

²⁶ Colburn Mayne p. 163.

needed strong motives against him. Her family and her lawyer persuaded her to have Byron visited by a doctor to declare him insane but this plan did not work out. Interestingly it was the opposite situation to the more common imputation of hysteria or madness brought against troublesome wives. In many instances Annabella and Byron's divorce was exceptional and extremely favourable to the woman. A reconciliation was still to be hoped for until she alluded to the suspicion of a renewal of Byron's incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh after their marriage. In order to provoke her, he had introduced Augusta into their life immediately after their wedding. He liked to point out that she would never be loved as much as his 'Goose' and kept her in the tantalizing doubt of their having sexual intercourse. She could not exclude Mrs Leigh from her brother's house without exposing the whole 'dreadful' situation to the world, and that she was resolved not to do, for Augusta's and Byron's sake, and in another sense, her child's. As soon as her lawyer learnt all the facts, he made his declaration that a re-union was impossible.

Furthermore, Byron himself made a reunion even more impossible by starting an affair with Claire Clairmont, the final blow to his married life. Annabella never got the consolation of witnessing Byron's regret over what he had done - quite the contrary, he made fun of the 'Princess of Parallelograms' as he used to call her, in *Don Juan*, pursuing what she called the 'abominable trade' of poetry - or even just his admitting his faults more than by blaming his 'unfortunate irascible temper', which he realized could be 'violent, gloomy and uncivil'²⁷ but still, he thought, should have been born by a really loving wife. He even blamed her for her calmness and endurance, which piqued him and produced the opposite effect on him, increasing his *mauvaise humeur*.²⁸ Faced with these irritating charges, Lady Blessington herself took Annabella's side against the poet's usual pose of ignorance concerning the separation, of which he felt an unjustly treated victim.

Her power over him ever after their separation was great, the mystery attached to her silence piqued him and kept his interest alive although he pretended to be unconscious of its cause, which surprised Lady Blessington, since his behaviour during as well as after their marriage had been far from irreproachable. She even tried to defend Lady Byron by presenting her as 'wearing away her youth in almost monastic seclusion, her motives questioned by some, and appreciated by few - seeking consolation alone in the discharge of her duties' of mother and daughter, while he was 'appealing on the separation to public sympathy by the publication of verses, for

²⁷ LBC p. 99.

²⁸ LBC p. 181.

example the not very flattering description of Donna Inez in *Don Juan*, which ought only to have met the eye of her to whom they were addressed.²⁹

In this instance Lady Byron, a woman, showed more strength of character, endurance and determination to be faithful to her principles than the famous hero-poet. Her strength was something he could neither appreciate or understand. He just wanted a woman to laugh. 'Lady Melbourne, Caroline Lamb, Augusta: *they* had the light touch. [...] Things were taken for granted. Adultery was a matter of course; incest not quite that but even incest was a topic on which one could now and then be facetious.'³⁰ Annabella was far too serious; everything in her was about duties, though she had some wit and even smiled about herself in one or two passages of her description in *Don Juan*. However in general she confessed 'it is always a task to me now to read his [Byron's] works, in which, through all the levity, I discern enough to awaken very painful feelings.'³¹

Annabella represents the unhappy unloved upper-class class wife with enough culture and wealth to leave her husband and retire into religion. The great disappointment of her life made her renounce all strong passions of youth – spontaneity, liveliness and peace of mind – in favour of the conviction that all she could do was 'her duty'. Her choice was stern and deliberate, deriving from her hurt pride. Yet as time went by she realized with increasing perplexity and a sense of ingratitude of her fellow human beings, that her noblest intentions were seldom operative and the closest attachments she formed the most disastrous, especially with the Byrons. Being his legal wife she had the power to keep her daughter with her, which gave much pain to Byron throughout his life. This was a privilege Claire Clairmont never had.

²⁹ *LBC*, p. 60.

³⁰ Colburn Mayne p. 227.

³¹ Fleming p. 183.

2.3. Catherine Gordon Byron and Augusta Leigh



Second for more or less wanted influence on Byron's life are his two nearest relations: his mother **Catherine Gordon Byron** and his half-sister Augusta Leigh. In Donna Inez, Don Juan's dominating, obsessive and comical mother he caricatured his own mother as well as his wife Annabella. After becoming a widow, young Catherine took care of her son, alternating moments of possessive affection with hysterical excesses and transferring the hatred for her late husband, who had married her exclusively for her money and had untimely died without having ever seen his child and leaving her without means, on him. 'Captain Jack' as he was called, seemed 'born for his own ruin and that of the other sex'³², since Catherine was not the first girl he had seduced and whose patrimony he had squandered. Lady Gordon Byron represents the girl of wealthy family and noble origin, married without love and in charge of a precocious and introverted child. Armistead Gordon³³ asserts that her marriage to Captain Gordon was a foolish one on her side for he was moneyless, a spendthrift and a licentious ne'er-do-well, had a natural daughter from his scandalous first marriage and consciously allured the dumpy girl with his winning manners to lay his hands on her fabled fortune. She was so flattered by that handsome face and ancient name that she took him without even making marriage settlements as was the custom among Scottish gentry and paid the penalty for it.

Family and title meant a lot to her and her pride of long descent was humiliated by the poignancy of the poverty she lived in. When 10-year-old George unexpectedly inherited the title of Lord from his grandfather, she did everything she could to grant him an aristocratic upbringing, though often tyrannizing him. Her violent Gordon temper was inherited by her son,

³² *Medwin* p.57.

³³ *Gordon* p. 17.

who could not agree that he was a 'Byron all over [...] as bad as your father'³⁴ but followed her persistent precept. Instead of correcting it while he was a child, it was made worse by her fits of rage and constant melancholic depression. She was a doting mother and did everything for her son, who was aware of her agreeable qualities and affection but regretted her caprices and passions overbalanced her positive traits. Byron remembered how her hurt pride in particular showed itself in a double way, either by seeking relieve from her unhappiness through what the youth called scurrilous and violent abuses or by congratulating herself on his having inherited 'what little accomplishments' he possessed 'either in mind or body' from 'her and *her alone*' (Letter to Augusta, November 17th, 1804). In this light it is no wonder the poet's childhood memories about his 'domestic Tyrant Mrs Byron' (Letter to Augusta, November 6th 1805) were not very good; as an adolescent he told Augusta 'the old lady and myself don't agree like lambs in a meadow', due to his being 'too fidgety' but even if they argued and differed, 'after a storm comes a calm' (Letter to Augusta, October 25th, 1804). In other letters to his half-sister he described violent disputes between mother and son, who could not bear to be constantly reminded of his faults and told 'to copy the *excellent pattern* which I see before me in *herself*', although he had to admit 'I do believe she likes me; she manifests that in many instances, particularly with regard to money' (November 17th, 1804).

However, the most painful recollections are those involving her fits: 'my poor mother was generally in a rage every day, and used to render me sometimes almost frantic; particularly when, in her passion, she reproached me with my personal deformity'³⁵, which would be a cause of mortification for his whole life. It was a common belief of the time that sins of the parents were reflected in children's deformities or illnesses. Whether she attributed his clubfoot to his father's bad influence or to some shock during her pregnancy is difficult to say, anyhow it must have been shocking for a little child to be blamed for a painful and degrading malformation he was obviously not responsible for. And in some way he internalized this rather puritan idea of visible punishment in the children of sin since he was terrified that Augusta's baby, whom he had befathered, might turn out an ape. Of course this was nonsense, though in some way Medora shared the unhappy and passionate destiny of her parents, as if she had to atone for their sins. In any case Catherine's charges were never forgotten by Byron, to the point that he declared 'that being who gave me birth, to whom I ought to look up with veneration and respect, but whom I am sorry I cannot love or admire' (Letter to Augusta, April 23rd, 1805).

³⁴ *Medwin* p. 57.

³⁵ *LBC* p. 80.

The image we get from her son is certainly not flattering; he could not understand his mother's unhappiness and depression, even though at heart they were so similar. She possessed little education, talked with a broad Scottish accent and dressed with a certain lack of taste but that could not dim her innate intelligence, pride and courage worthy of the best of her royal race. A pride that neither poverty nor unhappiness could break and which she passed on to her son. Trelawny remembered her not very flatteringly as the first cause of the poet's life-long psychic instability: 'Mental as well as physical diseases are hereditary. Byron's arrogant temper he inherited, his penurious habits were instilled into him by his mother; he was reared in poverty and obscurity and unexpectedly became a Lord, with a good estate: this was enough to unsettle the equanimity of such a temperament as his. But fortune as well as misfortune comes with both hands full, and when, as he himself said, he awoke one morning and found himself famous, his brain grew dizzy.'³⁶ Her influence was strong indeed and haunted him for all his life. Through boarding schools, University and travels Byron gradually shook off her unwanted control and was eager to keep a certain distance between them in order to avoid her meddling too much into his affairs and causing inevitable conflicts, as many of his letters show. Nonetheless, he was fond of her, apart from Augusta she represented his whole family and from abroad he sent her many letters to keep her informed about his adventures, while she sent him the news from his home-country. On his return he was surprised by her sudden death in 1811 and felt the loss heavily as he expressed in a letter: 'I now feel the truth of Mr. Gray's observation, "That we can only have *one* mother"' (Letter to Pigot, August 2nd, 1811). Jump affirms that 'though he can have felt little love or respect for her, he was deeply shocked: she was, after all, his mother, and intimately bound up with his earliest recollections.'³⁷

³⁶ *The Last Days of Shelley and Byron from Trelawny's Recollections*, p. 125.

³⁷ Jump p. 31.



If Catherine's influence was presented as generally negative by the poet, there is another member of his family who is always praised as the one to whom he 'owes the little good of which he can boast', a faultless being who did what Annabella, the other A., failed to do: 'pardon and weep over the errors of one less pure, and almost redeem them by her own excellence.'³⁸

Augusta Leigh, daughter of an earlier adulterous marriage of his father with the Marchioness of Carmarthen, had a decidedly weaker though not less complex personality. A few years older than her brother, she resembled him in appearance as well as temper, although she was more passive and inclined to submission. Jump³⁹ defines her as an affectionate and undemanding person, who may well have acted out of simple amoral fondness for her brother, while his attitude towards the liaison must assuredly have been more complex. As a perfect Narcissist, Byron often affirmed he could love no woman more than her, since she was the closest to him he could possibly find – she looked and behaved like a Byron. Of course, this did not detain him from having amorous relationships with other ladies but they were put off by him as 'fooling away my time with different "*regnantes*"; but what better could be expected from me? I have but one *relative*, and her I never see' (Letter to Augusta, March 26th, 1813), as if this could explain or justify his philandering behaviour as means of replacing the void in his heart nobody but Augusta could fill. He said he loved no other woman as much as her, 'not only as a *Brother* but as your warmest and most affectionate *Friend*, and if ever Circumstances should require it your *protector*' (letter to Augusta, March 22nd, 1804), all of which he did and even more, for she represented his ideal throughout his life. From Italy he wrote to her in 1819: 'I have never ceased, nor can cease to feel for a moment that perfect and boundless attachment which bound

³⁸ LBC p. 198-199.

³⁹ Jump p. 33.

and binds me to you – which renders me utterly incapable of *real* love for any other human being – for what could they be to me after you... whenever I love anything it is because it reminds me in some way or other of yourself..’

Despite his numerous love affairs, his feelings for her – which Annabella defined as ‘maniacal’ - remained unchanged. Their relationship was tender and affectionate from their first meeting as teenagers. Had they grown up together, they would have become best friends and probably their love would not have developed into a destructive passion. But as it was, ‘never having been much together, we are naturally more attracted to each other’ (Letter to Moore, July 8th, 1813) - perhaps even too much. Margot Strickland points out that when siblings fall in love with one another it is usually the result of an emotionally deprived childhood. Under his conquering assurance, she says, Byron was still the unhappy little boy while she had become a desirable, safely married wife and mother. They exchanged numerous letters while he was abroad and their reunion after several years was a joining of two people completely in tune with one another. In fact when during his successful season in London she was his constant companion at many social events. At the time she was described by the poet Thomas Moore, an intimate friend of her half-brother, as ‘very attractive.. affectionate.. childish.. ready to laugh at anything.’⁴⁰ This picture confirms her submissive and docile personality, although she was also a useful and expert guide in the labyrinth of connections and conventions he was thrown in after his return. In exchange he hosted her for many months in 1813, to help her out of a financial crisis due to Colonel George Leigh’s racing debts. With no other woman did he feel so much at ease as with kind, maternal and feminine Augusta, who was as lonely as he and longed for a companion to share her burdens with, offering consolation and boundless love in exchange. He found her endearing foolishness irresistible and her uncomplicated calm nature had a soothing effect compared with the scenes his other lovers made. As a sister she shared his blood, partook of his tortures and shared his doom, being at the same time the one who brought out the best of him, and for that he was thankful;

II

Thy soft heart refused to discover
The faults which so many could find;
Though thy Soul with my grief was acquainted,
It shrunk not to share it with me,
And the Love which my Spirit hath painted
It never hath found but in *Thee*.
(*Stanzas to Augusta*, July 24th, 1816)

⁴⁰ Strickland p. 16.

In acts and through poems, Augusta became the person he had most deeply injured despite her unflinching adoration, and for that reason he could never forget her. She was his closest intimate and chief victim in one. Their passion soon reached climax. When he told Lady Melbourne about his plans of going to Sicily with Augusta, she replied with extreme alarm to warn him from a fatal step. He must have confided to her his ambiguous sentiments for his half-sister and she felt they were on the brink of a precipice: 'If you do not retreat, you are lost for ever – it is a crime for which there is no salvation in this world, whatever there is in the next'. She also rebuked him for the 'cruelty of depriving of all future peace and happiness a woman who has hitherto, whether deservedly or not, maintained a good reputation.'⁴¹ Her concerns were more social than religious, after all Lady Melbourne had seen much in her long life and deemed nothing worse than the loss of one's reputation. Byron abandoned his plan but anyway during this period Augusta remained pregnant. Since she was already married to her neglectful cousin George Leigh, the child could have been legitimate, but there were rumours of incest. The poet felt this guilt painfully, seeing them as a consequence of that innate depravity his Calvinist tutors had taught him along with predestined damnation: 'God who made me for my own misery, and not much for the good of others' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, April 30th, 1814). That is why he considered himself responsible for that 'folly' and the 'injustice I have done *my A...* She was not to blame, one thousandth part in comparison. She was not aware of her own peril until it was too late.'⁴² In 1814, when they were perfectly happy together in Hastings, he decided to accept her advice of marrying, because, as Augusta said 'it was the only chance of redemption for two persons'⁴³, which indicates she felt how unwholesome their situation was but could not get out from it by herself. Byron had to act while she went back to her unsatisfactory husband. In Jump's words: 'as on previous occasions when his sexual entanglements had seemed intolerable, he thought of solving his problems by marriage or escaping them by foreign travel.'⁴⁴ As he explained himself in his journal, just one year before his marriage: 'A wife would be my salvation. I am sure the wives of my acquaintance [including Augusta we may add] have hitherto done me little good' (January 16th, 1814).

Gentle, passive Guss, mother of seven children and lifelong friend and consoler of her half-brother, was not deemed strong enough to decide for herself. She hoped a legitimate wife at his side would finally dispel all the rumours about incest that were seriously threatening the position at Court she desperately needed to maintain her feckless husband. The idea was good

⁴¹ Colburn Mayne p. 64.

⁴² Colburn Mayne p. 93.

⁴³ Fleming p. 188.

⁴⁴ *Byron* p. 33.

but Byron's ambiguous poems and revelations did not improve the situation nor did his union with Miss Milbanke, because she could not break up with him completely. Even after he married, he often invited her to his house, as if to make Annabella jealous. Once again Lady Melbourne disapproved and blamed also Augusta's lack of delicacy at which he answered 'Pray do not speak so harshly of her to me – the cause of all... I know no name for my conduct.'⁴⁵ Byron's tendency to underestimate Augusta's part in their relationship and to attribute the fault only to himself, made her look even more superficial and incapable of complex feelings than she actually was. Certainly her love was more superficial or altruistic than his, otherwise his marriage would not have been such a relief to her. It is hard to say whether she was clever and wicked as Lady Melbourne suspected and feigned an interest in her future sister-in-law, or simply incapable of feeling deeply apart from a blind adoration for her brother. For Strickland Annabella was sincere, Augusta devious. He called her a fool and she often found her convenience in this foolishness of hers, it was convenient and fascinating to be naively in need of guidance to dispel suspicion.

It cannot be said how much Annabella suspected. Moreover she was inclined to believe sweet Guss too innocent and weak to resist Byron's powerful mind. Surely she had personal and pecuniary obligations towards her wilful brother, who helped her 'rabbit-warren of a family' economically (even after his death by making her his sole heiress) and was excessively amused by her conversation and company. How could she deny him anything?, Annabella thought, maybe she did not even wish to be his lover but could not resist. Anyway, whether Augusta was consciously, perversely or really innocent, the rumours were spreading. They had started with the publication of *The Bride of Abydos*, containing once again autobiographical elements of Byron's life. He liked to play with fire, not caring for his reputation or Augusta's, when he wrote about two lovers, Selim and Zuleika who believe themselves to be brother and sister. Yet he claimed '*intentionally* I have never wronged you'⁴⁶ as if it was simply their destiny to find themselves in such a situation. There were however other autobiographical elements in his later poems, which shocked and excited the reading public, especially concerning the doubts about their much talked-about incestuous relationship his *Stanzas to Augusta* seemed to confirm rather than dispel.

IV

Though human, thou didst not deceive me,
Though woman, thou didst not forsake,
Thou loved, thou forborest to grieve me,
Though slandered, thou never couldst shake, ---

⁴⁵ Colburn Mayne p.81.

⁴⁶ Strickland p. 23.

Though trusted, thou didst not disclaim me,
Though parted, it was not to fly,
Though watchful, 'twas not to defame me,
Nor, mute, that the world might belie.
(*Stanzas to Augusta*, July 24th, 1816)

In spite of open statements of admiration for Augusta similar to this one made by the poet, Lady Byron decided not to heed the whispers. She loved her sister-in-law and always took her side, even calling her 'my greatest consolation' after her unsuccessful marriage, for which she could have blamed her rival. It is interesting how she tried to save Augusta from the poet's influence after his second and last departure from England. There was no envy for the step-sister who had everything the wife had lost: Byron's love, a husband, a home and a place in the world. She found consolation, and perhaps in her own moral impeccable way a sort of revenge, in playing the forgiving angel, trying to save her sister-in-law from her diabolic half-brother. 'My great object', she wrote to Mrs Villiers on May 16th, 1816, 'next to the security of my child, is... the restoration of her mind to a state which is religiously desirable'⁴⁷, a project which included their never resuming their intercourse again and many extorted confessions. Augusta's heart bled, the remorse was unbearable towards Byron as well as his wife, but she submitted again - she became Annabella's voice when she wrote to her brother about Ada, to the point that he could barely recognize his 'only source of consolation in his troubles on the separation', as he described her to Lady Blessington⁴⁸, any more. This rupture was painfully felt by the poet, whose deepest and only happy attachments were to women who made him comfortable: Lady Oxford, Lady Melbourne, Teresa. No one made him more comfortable than Augusta, and had he not been involved with sweet Teresa, he would not have born the blow of his half-sister's detachment influenced by Annabella. He did not believe she could turn against him of her own free will and kept writing her passionate letters from Italy, where he wished her to visit him. As if to soothe her, he told her 'you need not fear about *me*. I am much altered and should be little trouble to you, nor would I give you more of my company than you like.' It sounds like a promise to behave respectfully, to do anything in order to induce her to join him and have 'one of our laughs' (Letter to Augusta, July 26th, 1819). However, she could not be persuaded or was detained and they never met again. In Strickland's words, she gave up Byron without scandal, scarifying the only fulfilling love of her life to the good of her position at court and in society, her frustrating marriage and her harassing children. Once again, Byron held others responsible for Augusta's actions, she was never deemed capable to decide for herself:

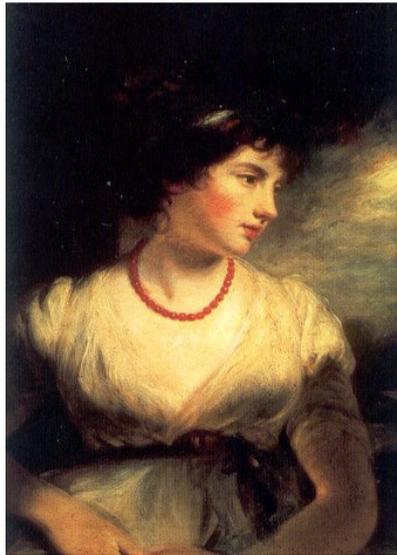
⁴⁷ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 95.

⁴⁸ *LBC* p. 19.

Lady Byron's people, and Lady Caroline Lamb's people, and a parcel of that set, got about her and frightened her with all sorts of hints and menaces, so that she has never since been able to write to me a *clear common letter* [...] all my loves too, make a point of calling upon her, which puts her into a flutter. [...] Lady Frances W[edderburn] W[ebster] marched in upon her, and Lady Oxford talked to her [...] It is a very odd fancy that they all take to her. (Letter to Murray, September 20th, 1821).

It seems all of Byron's mistresses tried to subdue her will to theirs after they had failed with her half-brother, realizing that Augusta really showed no will of her own. Her weakness was universally known and exploited. She herself admitted that 'decision was never my forte' and Annabella added to this statement 'half-measures will always be her bane.' The unhappy bane indeed of being the perfect eighteenth-century wife, mother of many children she was always worried about, faced with social and economic problems that were part of her circle, passive, devoted though maybe not completely faithful to her neglecting husband. Self-sacrifice and renounce to her own happiness was the price to pay as she well knew.

2.4. Aristocratic ladies – Lady Oxford, Lady Melbourne and Caroline Lamb



Having one or more adulterous relationships after a very often financially planned marriage between partners who were unequal in every sense apart from social, was not rare at the time, as Byron himself ironically says more than once in *Don Juan*:

In her first passion woman loves her lover,
In all the others all she loves is love. [...]
One man alone at first her heart can move;
She then prefers him in the plural number,
Not finding that the additions much encumber.
(DJ III, 3)

Since 'love and marriage rarely can combine' (DJ, III, 5) 'one thing's pretty sure: a woman planted/ (Unless at once she plunge for life in prayers)/After a decent time must be gallanted' (DJ, III, 4). As Lawrence Stone points out, 'the idea of female honour depended upon a reputation for premarital chastity and marital fidelity was one which was most effectively internalized in the middling ranks of society. [...] After marriage, however, and especially after the first son was born, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aristocratic court ladies felt themselves free to take lovers if they chose, despite the problems of paternity which such behaviour could cause.'⁴⁹ Most rich and independent ladies were known to have lovers, as for example was the case of **Lady Oxford**. Her marriage was not a love match, in Byron's melodramatic words 'she had been sacrificed, almost before she was a woman, to one whose mind and body were equally contemptible in the scale of creation; and on whom she bestowed

⁴⁹ Stone: *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, p. 504.

a numerous family, to which the law gave him the right to be called father.⁵⁰ Her large number of children was ironically known as the 'Harleian Miscellany' due to uncertainties over whether her husband was their natural father, but the marriage did not break up. A cultured and sophisticated lady with a compliant husband, she had been Sir Francis Burdett's mistress among other and 'her forty 'autumnal' years did not stop her bedding the young Byron, sixteen years her junior.'⁵¹ Her beauty, voluptuous forms and intellectual as well as political engagement soon conquered the poet, who was prompted by his mistress to attend Parliament more frequently, introduced to foreign literature he did not know and instructed in the amatory art in a motherly way. For this he always remembered her good temper and outward appearance 'the *best* I ever beheld' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, October 13th, 1812).

Byron was not against illegitimate liaisons; Lady Oxford and Caroline Lamb, who dominated his love life in turns for quite a while, as well as young Constance Spencer-Smith, were his English high-born muses, despite being married. And he was certainly not the only man they betrayed their husbands with. The suddenly famous author of *Childe Harold* was sought-after king for the season of 1812, since 'the impersonation of myself, which, in spite of all I could say, the world would discover in that poem, made everyone curious to know me, and to discover the identity.'⁵² Being all part of the *beau monde* of London, these ladies were somehow all connected and knew their rivals in the fight for the poet's heart. It had become a fashionable game to invite and befriend this darkly mysterious, fascinating man; to be seen with him was scandalous and desirable at the same time. Byron had become 'what the French call un *homme à bonnes fortunes*' and quickly found himself tangled in the jungle of jealousies, intrigues and betrayals of the capital.

⁵⁰ *Medwin* p. 70.

⁵¹ *Gatrell* p. 358.

⁵² *Medwin* p. 214.



His friendship with the powerful **Lady Melbourne**, aunt of Annabella and mother-in-law to Caroline Lamb, gave him assistance and guidance for the amusing part he had come to play. In fact he felt his new position as an unwished theatrical role assigned to him: 'With the world I have a part to play; to be different there, is to wear a drag-chain, and luckily I do so thoroughly despise half of the people in it, that my insolence is almost natural' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, April 29th, 1814). This insolence of his behaviour certainly contributed to depict him as a rascal, even more than he actually was but as long as he had the right connections, it did only add charm to his character. And the best connection he could have at the time was that to an old queen of society like Lady Melbourne. This *grand dame*, scintillating hostess and at the time regnant of London society, had grown respectable after innumerable love affairs in her life with the Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, Lord Coleraine, Lord Egremont and the Duke of Bedford. In fact only the first of her six children were by her husband. Beautiful, intelligent and ambitious, she sought lovers to secure her success and that of her children. As the mistress of George the Fourth for years on end, she was at the pinnacle of personal achievement and consolidated this position by opening her house to politicians, princes and Prime ministers. Strickland sums up that she was 'never anyone's mistress but her own'⁵³.

Byron had a great deal in common with her: 'her worldly wisdom, her caustic agreeability, and her equable temper appealed to him; so for the matter did her cynicism and her lack of refinement'⁵⁴ which earned her the nickname of 'Thorn' for her sharp tongue and intolerantly mocking waspish attitude. She could have been a perfect lover for him, had she not been too old. Instead she came to be 'the greatest *friend* of the female gender' Byron ever had – 'and when I say friend', he remarked, 'I mean *not* mistress, for that's the antipode.'⁵⁵ As a friend and confidante she was 'the best, and kindest, and ablest female I ever knew – old or young'. He

⁵³ Strickland p. 96.

⁵⁴ Cecil p. 168.

⁵⁵ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 119.

declared 'I do love that woman (*filially or fraternally*) better than any being on earth' (Letter to Annabella, February 12th, 1814), although her flirtatious correspondence, which she saw as agreeable diversion, also complicated his situation more than once. Flashing between Lady Oxford, Lady Frances Webster, Caroline, Annabella and Augusta, Byron asked his 'good genius' for help but the dazzling old Lady had her own plans and was not as secretive and loyal as her protégé thought her to be. Indeed he sometimes expressed his doubts about her being sincere, which he 'still a little hesitated in believing' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, September 13th, 1812). Nonetheless, she was his truest female friend and he paid her a big compliment by trusting her despite his declared aversion to women in general, as he told her himself: 'I have no very high opinion of your sex, but when I do see a woman superior not only to all her own but to most of ours, I worship her in proportion as I despise the rest' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, September 25th, 1812). He also appreciated her power over him and accepted it only because he 'never saw such traits of discernment, observation of character, knowledge of your own sex and sly concealment of your own knowledge of the foibles of ours' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, October 18th, 1812). Unfortunately, despite all her worldly experience, pairing off the poet with her prudish niece rousing Caroline's fury, she made the biggest mistake of her diplomatic life.

Lady Melbourne definitely was one of a kind and very different from both her niece and her daughter-in-law; with the latter, in particular, she never got on well. Cecil describes them as total opposites: 'earth and fire, sense and sensibility, realism and fantasy, the eighteenth century and the nineteenth'⁵⁶ which in our case is very interesting. Although according to the old lady's code of behaviour a young man was perfectly justified in making love to a married woman if she was willing and she could appreciate his intimacy with her and her family, she directed his interest elsewhere when Caroline's conduct became too damaging. Her young daughter-in-law was more difficult to manipulate than all the old lady's lovers put together.

⁵⁶ Cecil p. 122.



Indeed, **Caroline Lamb** came to play such an important and in the end excessively compromising role in his life that he had to end their relationship when she started to be too clinging. She can be considered as the typical well-born, coquettish, vain and worldly lady of the late eighteenth century, who always fed the gossip in the various salons with her extravagant follies. Her position as the young wife of William Lamb, Lord Melbourne, who would later become the protector and advisor of Queen Victoria, allowed her to behave as the 'wild savage' she was sometimes defined, without undergoing too much censure. 'Slight, agile, and ethereal, with a wide-eyed wilful little face, and curly short hair, she still looked a child; like something less substantial even – 'The Spirit, Fairy Queen and Ariel' people called her.'⁵⁷ No wonder earnest Lord Melbourne fell in love with her uniqueness; no one could have been less like the conventional idea of a young lady – 'on fire for the dramatic, the picturesque, the ideal, openly at war with the tame and the trivial, at every turn she flouted convention. [...] As for orthodox feminine employments, gossip, embroidery, they filled her with ineffable contempt.'⁵⁸ This made her a doubtlessly fascinating woman but too temperamental for family life and the role in society she was to assume as William Lamb's wife. After a short and ecstatic period of happiness, it became clear that in spite of her charms and talents, her character would not allow her to be a satisfactory wife for any man. This was mainly due to her devouring egotism that made her see life as a drama in which she was the fearless and sensitive Romantic heroine 'in the last Vol. of her troubles'⁵⁹, superior to all conventions and applauded by everyone. A sort of female equivalent of Childe Harold, characterized by boundless vanity. Until her meeting with the man, whose 'pale face' was to become 'her fate', her extravagances had been under control. Some hysterical scenes at the wedding, a peculiar preference for male clothing, which was an expression of the cross-dressing fashion of the time, a few excessive words or letters, a desire to

⁵⁷ Cecil p. 98.

⁵⁸ Cecil p. 99.

⁵⁹ Strickland p. 50.

impress the world by her emancipation, which led her to befriend ladies such as promiscuous Lady Oxford, but nothing more. However, when she managed to get in contact with the famous poet, whom she admired for his works, and start a coquettish and for that time scandalously open relationship with him, her behaviour became too unbalanced. He was not the only one to be 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'.

Had her family and husband been firmer, she might have conquered it, but as things were, her acquaintances could only shake their heads and be worried about her future as can be seen in two letters of her grandmother, Lady Spencer: 'Dear child, she does not know how much she lowers her character by such improprieties. Thank God they are only childish but that is unfit for her situation' and 'she knows not the pain she gives to you and me and too probably the misery she is preparing for herself; and all not from vice, but Vanity, inordinate Vanity.'⁶⁰ Although at the time she did not know it, these words were prophetic. Caroline was preparing her social death.

Although she did not aesthetically conform to his ideal of woman, being too thin, Byron could not resist the temptation of conquering one of the reigning queens of the new glittering world he had been flung into. He considered Caro a 'little volcano' and for the two months of their liaison at least he praised her to be 'the cleverest, the most agreeable, absurd, amiable, perplexing, dangerous, fascinating little being that lives now' (Letter to Caroline Lamb, March 1812). Unfortunately, these traits were not what he was looking for in a woman and after the initial violent passion was gone, their incompatibilities became unbearable. Neither of them was in love, it was all about their self-representation. At first her oddities amused Byron: 'I never knew a woman with greater or more pleasing talents, general as in a woman they should be, something of everything, & too much of nothing, but these are unfortunately coupled with a total want of common conduct.'⁶¹

After a short time her fixation on the handsome poet was so strong and out of the world that she portrayed him as 'that dear, that misguided and misleading Byron' and was ready to follow him anywhere. She started to grow more demanding and embarrassing, to the point that she dressed up as one of his pageboys to see him, displaying her love for cross-dressing, which was not usual at the time, especially in masquerades. Strickland asserts that Caroline had been impressed by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Right of Women* and the ungovernable urge for freedom growing within her found expression in her addiction to boy's clothes in which she could enjoy the liberty (at least of movement) man had. Furthermore she suggests that

⁶⁰ Fleming p. 158.

⁶¹ Fleming p. 157.

precisely this garb and androgynous look might have attracted Byron, who had had a number of love affairs with boys. Their disillusionment of the superficial society they belonged to was another strong link between them, although for a man there was more tolerance of unconventional behaviours than for a women of their rank. Caroline's oddities were unheard of and absolutely scandalous, often dictated by her extreme jealousy and once again her vanity and distance from the real world prevented her becoming Byron's mutual mind. 'I am easily governed by women', he told Medwin, 'and she gained an ascendancy over me that I could not easily shake off. I submitted to this thralldom long, for I hate *scenes*, and am of an indolent disposition; but I was forced to snap the knot rather rudely at last.'⁶² She wanted complete power over him and exaggerated so much in her feelings, that the whole affair became too damaging for her name and her family sent her to Ireland under the pretence of her being mentally ill. It was not that extra-matrimonial relationships were not allowed, most families and husbands knew very well about their wives' dealings but as long as they followed certain rules, they were accepted and ignored. In Caroline's case it was just out of control and no longer acceptable, neither for her family nor for Byron. At the same time, always guided by his good friend Lady Melbourne, he was also forming an interest in Annabella, Caroline's relative but in any other aspect her opposite. In the end both turned out to be too tiring, the one too fiery, the other too cold, and since the poet said he could not exist without some object of love, he found one with whom he was 'perfectly satisfied' because their 'mutual wish is *quiet*' and little trouble, which for him meant a 'double pleasure (after all the ridiculous display of last season) in repose' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, November 9th, 1812). Besides, the woman he was verging towards, he said elsewhere: 'saves me the trouble of marrying, by being married already' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, September 25th, 1812). Of course he was talking of Lady Oxford, with whose erotic charms he took refuge during Caro's absence, since the former's 'autumn of beauty was preferable to the spring of others'⁶³ i.e. the latter. The young savage and little maniac possessed by 'the Devil, and Medea, and her Dragons to boot', as he described her to Hobhouse (January 17th, 1813), never forgave him for abandoning her. Her self-mutilating revenge consisted in portraying him very badly in her Gothic novel *Glenarvon*, containing his last letter to her in which he implored her to end their relationship, directed and sealed by Lady Oxford, her rival in love. That had been the only request of that voluptuous lady, whose cool and easy-going sexuality allowed him to enjoy the pleasure of the body safe from neurotic scenes and jealousies, until she reluctantly ended their affair and left for the Continent with her husband. However, a simple letter was not enough to break up with Caroline, whose precarious mental

⁶² Medwin p. 216.

⁶³ Medwin p. 70.

balance had suffered such a blow from Byron's rejection that she never really recovered. After the scandalous scene at Lady Heathcote's ball, where she cut her arms with a broken glass in a fit of jealousy, she reached a climax with the publication of *Glenarvon*, which was avidly read by people who identified themselves some with horror and others with glee, as would later happen with Byron's *Don Juan* too. Such a public outcry of her infidelity which would have seemed exaggerated even to Lady Oxford and would have ruined a less glorious personage; even though she was allowed to get away with a great deal, that was too much. She was banned from society and her marriage doomed to fail, had not Lord Melbourne's good heart preferred to take care of an insane woman rather than divorcing from her. Derangement betrayed itself through a series of distressing actions to gain back the poet's heart with the only result of exasperating him even more. 'Her after-conduct was unaccountable madness – a combination of spite and jealousy'⁶⁴ he said.

In his works Byron rarely remembers his past lovers in a positive way, as we can read in *Don Juan*: 'Where are the Lady Carolines and Franceses? / Divorced or doing thereanent' (XI, 80). When Lady Blessington reproached him for his too deep contempt he explained that if she knew half the cause he had to dislike Caroline, she would not condemn him.⁶⁵ The morals of the age regarded adultery or the cold coquette's 'innocent flirtation, / Not quite adultery, but adulteration' (*DJ* XII, 63) as the normal occupation of all men and most women, as has been seen for Caroline Lamb, Lady Oxford and the Franceses mentioned in *Don Juan* – Frances Wedderburn Webster and Lady Frances Annesley. The former, for instance, apart from being one of Byron's conquests, was mistress of the married Wellington at the time when he was also entangled with Caroline Lamb, who sought consolation in his arms after the poet's rejection in favour of Lady Oxford. Love life in high-society was definitely complex and amoral around the poet, but none of these ladies nor any other of the high-born objects of his attention lost social caste by their association with him. Extra-matrimonial relationships were expected to be secretive, private, of more or less long duration but always about pleasure. When they became too difficult or full of duties, it was better to break them up, as Byron so often did, choosing easier prey and boasting about their number.

⁶⁴ *Medwin* p. 217.

⁶⁵ *LBC* p. 151.

2.5. Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys



Such was the case of a woman who had no legal power over him at all but still wanted to be his prey just as much as he did not want to be her predator: **Claire Clairmont**. There was another, rather sad, powerless and very common status, which she shared with numerous other women of all classes - neither spinsters, married, divorced or remarried but seduced, abandoned 'fallen' girls, with no legal claim over their illegitimate children. Mary Jane, for that was Claire's real name, the self-willed stepdaughter of William Godwin, younger half-sister of Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley's sister-in-law, propelled herself into a liaison with Byron just before he left England in 1816, during the distressing time of his divorce from Annabella. The young girl of eighteen had just returned from an adventurous journey to France, where she had followed her beloved step-sister Mary and Shelly on her elopement with Shelley. Their influence had made her a bright, charming and clever free-thinker with great Romantic ideals. Having read *Childe Harold* well before she saw the beauties of Mont Blanc with her own eyes, she was a fervent admirer of Lord Byron, whom she was eager to know, maybe to keep up with her step-sister and find an even more famous poet than Shelley all for herself.

The first quasi-anonymous love-letter addressed to Byron was from 'E. Trefusis', describing herself as an utter stranger who had loved and admired him for many years and asked for his secrecy:

If a woman, whose reputation has yet remained unstained, if without either guardian or husband to control she would throw herself upon your mercy, if with a beating heart she should confess the love she has borne you many years, if she should secure to you secrecy and safety, if she should return your kindness with kind affection and unbounded devotion, could you betray her or would you be silent as the grave? (Grylls p. 55)

Either her youth or her admiration made her blind to the risk she was taking, ruining her reputation and giving her heart to someone who did not want it, receiving only irritation and annoyance in exchange of her feelings, whether they came from her soul or ambition. He did not

answer and 'E. Trefusis' turned into 'G.C.B.', asking for a private interview, to which he stiffly acquiesced. It was not the first time anonymous or unknown female admirers had wanted to see the famous poet for a private tête-à-tête, which often ended in bed. It was somehow expected of him and he certainly did not refuse, although he was hardly ever in love. As he asked his friend Kinnaird in a letter on January 20th, 1817, how could he possibly resist an eighteen-year old girl who flings herself into his arms 'comes prancing at all hours? There is but one way – the suite is that she was with child.' He tried to justify his behaviour to Augusta too: '...as to all these mistresses, Lord help me, I have had but one. What could I do? A foolish girl in spite of all I could say or do, would come after me.'⁶⁶

Claire's desire to possess the man of her dreams was even stronger than Caroline Lamb's importunities and her letters longer than Annabella's. Byron did not resist long, he was more or less pestered into taking her as a mistress and although he thought her quite 'odd-headed', her lovely singing voice and amiable company made him momentarily forget the worries about money, separation and Augusta. At least until new worries came up - when he allowed her to persuade him into her first ridiculous scheme of spending a night with him out of London it was too late to go back. After she convinced the Shelleys to pursue him to Switzerland, where the poets became good friends, he was exceedingly annoyed to find out she was pregnant. It was thanks to Percy Shelley's intercession that they came to an agreement – Claire would have the baby in England without the Godwins knowing and then Byron would make the necessary provision. In the meantime, as long as the child was still unborn, he was little interested in the whole embarrassing situation and more than relieved to put her off, as he told Augusta: 'the *Damoiselle* - who returned to England from Geneva – went there to produce a little baby B., who is now about to make his appearance. You wanted to hear some adventures – there are enough I think for one epistle' (December 18th, 1816). His first suggestion was to give the baby B. to Augusta but the mother-to-be protested, so they decided it should always be with one or other parent until the age of seven. 'He would probably have agreed to anything to get rid of her – as he made quite obvious'⁶⁷ although he did not stick to his promises and soon after Allegra's birth declared: 'If Claire thinks that she shall ever interfere with the child's morals or education, she is mistaken; she never shall' (Letter to Hoppner, September 10th, 1820). Some of the most beautiful and high-born young women had laid their hearts down before him to be trampled on, so why should he keep up a disadvantageous affair with the daughter of nobody? He grew annoyed at what had allured him at first, her vivacity, her voice and her wit and his indifference

⁶⁶ Grylls: *Claire Clairmont – Mother of Byron's Allegra*, p. 63.

⁶⁷ Grylls p. 69.

soon slipped into dislike. Moreover, he was tired of her unsophisticated attachment and sugary letters that showed all her vain hopes to reach his heart through his love for the child:

I don't complain to you, dearest Albé [her nickname for him], nor would not if you were thrice as unkind... Indeed, my dearest dear, if you will write me a little letter to say how you are, how all your love are, and above all if you say you sometimes think of me without anger, and that you will love and take care of the child, I shall be as happy as possible..' Autumn 1816 (Grylls p. 76).

Happy she was not destined to be, nor to get any satisfaction. Little Allegra was taken from Claire at a tender age and they were allowed to see each other again just once before the child's premature death at the age of five. Not having the right to see her daughter was a sad fate the young mother shared with the two important men of her life: Shelley and Byron. The first was not given the custody of his children from the first marriage after his wife drowned herself. Unusual as it was for a father to be separated from his offspring, there was a heavy charge of atheism against Shelley that could not be disputed. Both men lost their case because public opinion was against those who dared to express ideas that did not conform to religious, social and moral rules of England, as Gordon argues. In fact, Byron too never got to see Ada again, since she had been assigned to Annabella and although he suffered from the absence of his daughter and complained about his wife's cold heart, he behaved in just the same manner with his mistress. According to his selfish plans, Allegra should replace Ada as his comfort in old age but never in his heart, where the legitimate daughter would always come first. When Claire's daughter was four years old, he put her in a convent, where education was cheaper than in England, she would get a Catholic education and be raised as his beloved Teresa had been, far from his household and without him having to worry. Moreover, a fair foreign education and a respectable fortune would make her 'after-settlement' easier, she might even marry respectably despite being a natural child. He had it all planned, although he was not so fond of her as of Ada, he meant to make their fortunes equal in his will, under the curious condition that she should not marry an Englishman. However it never came to that, since Allegra died a few months later of a fever.

Even though it must have been terrible for Claire to be abandoned by the man she loved and to live under the shadow of over-anxiety for having to part with her baby, she felt that Byron would be able to ensure Allegra a brilliant future, which she could not offer her and had no right deny her. She had not expected the blow of receiving a letter from a messenger telling her that if Byron was to take the baby, he would have nothing more to do with her and she must give up all claim on the child. Useless were her letters, Shelley's intercession and all her tears – she was not allowed to have any contact with her, although it was evident that Byron was not taking great care of her. He behaved hard-heartedly on this occasion, increasing Claire's worries by

threatening to take Allegra as his mistress when she were older, since he believed her to be Shelley's and not his daughter. However, he soon withdrew this rumour when his friend was accused of incest with his sister-in-law. Perhaps it was because he himself felt guilty for his relationship with Augusta, but Byron fervently stood up for Shelley against this charge, declaring that she was Mary's step-sister and had no blood-relationship with the poet. Thus an eventual relationship could not be deemed incestuous. L. Stone tells us that 'many spinster sisters-in-law, who helped out in the households of their married sisters in emergencies, were naturally very willing to replace them permanently when they died, which no doubt accounts for the tremendous battle in the mid-nineteenth century over the proposal to remove the incest taboo on marriage with a deceased wife's sister.'⁶⁸ Their situation was even worse than a widow, Browne affirms, since spinsters had to pretend sexual ignorance and never quite got rid of their state of total dependence.

The tittle-tattle was forgotten again but Claire's condition was distressing – penniless, discarded by her mother, unlawful mother herself of an illegitimate child – and her future capacity to earn an honest living depended on her ability to keep up appearances and to preserve her reputation. No wonder her anguish grew:

I am very unhappy over Allegra, really, I think I shall never see her again. And if Shelley were to die, there is nothing left for us [Mary and Claire] but dying too. All the good you can do for me is not to hate me, but for Allegra everything depends on you. Do not make me mention what you *ought* to do for her, for I know that every word that falls from my mouth is serpents or toads to you. (Grylls p. 121).

Indeed they were. Her letters were defined as insolent by Byron, who 'if not for the poor little child's sake' would have been 'almost tempted to send her back to her atheistical mother but that would be too bad'⁶⁹. It is true that Claire was sometimes overreacting due to her premonition of never seeing her daughter again. Allegra was everything she had; the only consolation which made her endure 'the mortification and displeasures to which a poor and unhappy person is exposed in the world'⁷⁰, especially a young, unloved mistress without her child. She did not know it, but her passion for Byron was fading and slowly turning into the same feeling he had for her, though less ironic since she felt more deeply. Her statement 'time will show you that I love gently and with affection, that I am incapable of revenge'⁷¹ turned out to be true, to her disadvantage. In a letter to Augusta the poet shows nothing but annoyance and mocking sarcasm for Claire's comprehensible wish to be with her daughter: 'Allegra is well but

⁶⁸ Stone p. 383.

⁶⁹ Grylls p. 124.

⁷⁰ Grylls p.139.

⁷¹ Strickland p. 122.

her mother (whom the Devil may confound) came prancing the other day over the Apennines – to see her *shild*; which threw my Venetian loves (who are none of the quietest) into great combustion; [...] I declined seeing her for fear that the consequence might be an addition to the family' (September 21st, 1818). Callousness and complete lack of interest were all he felt for his former mistress, who was no longer willing to throw herself at his feet. The last straw was Allegra's death, for which she held him responsible but still could not hate him: 'My sentiments have not experienced any change with regard to Lord Byron... it would give me pleasure to know that he was happy, for I am not revengeful... not even to him', who openly declared he never loved nor pretended to love her and 'wantonly, wilfully destroyed my Allegra'⁷².

Since Shelley's death had left her and Mary without means of subsistence, she decided to work as a governess and teacher all over Europe and spent the rest of her life raising children of strangers, grieving over her unhappy love and tremendous loss and turned to the Catholic faith to seek consolation. She even considered writing a book to 'illustrate from the lives of Shelley and Byron the dangers and evils resulting from erroneous opinions on the relations of the sexes.'⁷³ This was not her only literary effort; from Italy she wrote articles that were seldom valued more than those by Lady Blessington, just to add another defeat to her life. During her lonely years abroad she kept an eye, mostly of contempt, on Byron and his poetry. About *Don Juan* she acutely observed that it appeared do her 'a soliloquy upon his own ill-luck – ungraceful and selfish – like a beggar hawking his own sores about and which create disgust instead of pity'⁷⁴. She knew about the rumours of his affair with Augusta, whom she pitied for the tortures undergone because of her brother; about his complaints against Lady Byron, though he never attempted to see Ada again and just hid behind his accusations; and about Teresa Guiccioli, the love slave faithful unto death. Did all these women make him happier than he could have been with her, had he appreciated her vitality and wit? Or would he have grown weary in any case, as he always did of all his lovers, apart from those he could not possess completely – Lady Oxford and Augusta? The easiest prey that was offered to him was the one he felt most hunted by.

⁷² Strickland p. 133.

⁷³ Grylls p. 213.

⁷⁴ Strickland p. 129.

It is surprising that such a close relation of Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first and most important feminist writers, should have such a destiny. As we have said, Claire was not her daughter, but still she was Mary Shelley's step-sister. All three women had a difficult matrimonial life, despite or maybe because of their wish for freedom. As so often, ideas and personalities were seen through the lenses of one's reputation in front of the severely critical society – Wollstonecraft's ideals could not be taken into consideration since she had had an illegitimate child from Imlay and even her marriage to Godwin presented some irregularities. Mary's impulsive association with Shelley was condemned less harshly than Claire's, since the latter was judged the untrained child of an unknown father, while the former was the daughter of the famous Godwin, and mother of a future baronet. Still, not even when their unions were legitimized – the two Marys married and Claire's shame died with her daughter – could they be redeemed.

Nonetheless, their ruined reputation was not the worst thing that happened to them. William Godwin abandoned his free love principles to marry Mary Wollstonecraft and their relationship was happy until she died of childbirth when Mary, his daughter, was born. Young Mary eloped with Percy Shelley, giving much scandal, since he was married, and upsetting her father, who saw his disciple put into practice the anti-nuptial theory he had preached and which he had himself disregarded. After Shelley's tragic death, Byron had to intercede for her to obtain some financial aid for the poor widow and her son, because her position was unstable and not accepted. And Claire had no rights at all, Byron showed little mercy for her, despite his suffering from not being allowed to see his daughter Ada again for the same reasons. Being the natural mother was always less important than being a legitimate wife, but both had no guaranteed right to the custody of their children. Respect for a mother's right started to be reflected in politics only from 1773⁷⁵, when a bill was proposed that a child should not be taken from a mother without her consent, merely to reduce infant mortality. All rights for women came through men, their fathers, brothers or husbands, and later their sons. It is no wonder that Mary Wollstonecraft fought for sexual equality, unfortunately the time was not ripe and her irregular personal life alienated the support of most men.

⁷⁵ Alice Browne: *The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind*, p. 135.

3. Libertinism in the eighteenth century

3.1. Marriage and Libertinism between England, Italy and Europe

Nonetheless there were some changes taking place in the sexual conduct of the late eighteenth century, also thanks to Wollstonecraft's desire for female equality in the wake of enlightened ideals and the French Revolution. However, before we turn to that a more detailed comparison between the purposes and ways of settling marriage in England and other European countries should be considered.

From an early stage England had had some revolutionary laws concerning marriage, which were wondered about in the rest of Europe. One of them for example concerned the lack of the need for parental consent for a union, which was a central feature of all marriage systems. Until the Marriage Act of 1753, as Montesquieu pointed out, 'English daughters frequently married according to their own fancy without consulting their parents because they were allowed to do so by law, whereas in France there was a law which ordains that they shall wait for the consent of their fathers'⁷⁶ as was also the case in Germany, where French law ruled. English law, from the twelfth century onwards, was different - there was more independence for the young couple whose union was held to be legal without the consent of parent, guardian, lordship or family until 1753. In that year a Bill against adolescents' elopement forbade partners under twenty-one to marry without their parents' approval. Before that it was very easy to contract a legally binding marriage – exchange of vows before a witness was enough, even without a clergyman or in circumstances different from what the church canon required. The subsequent Act decreed that unions were legal only if held in church and after the banns had been read for three consecutive weeks. This need for time and a parental consent for minors made it impossible for a woman to force a marriage against the will of the man, so there was some kind of advantage at least on the male side.

In earlier periods, as Alice Brown⁷⁷ affirms, upper-class parents expected to choose their children's spouses, allowing them a limited right of veto; by the end of the eighteenth century, children expected to choose their own spouses, subject to their parents' approval at least as long as they were minors. Macfarlane suggests that this modern principle was at the basis of romantic love marriage and was founded on much older free Germanic customs, later muffled in Europe by the re-ascendance of the Roman law, which gave great power to the father whose consent was necessary to sanction a wedding. Only in England, especially after the schism from

⁷⁶ Macfarlane: *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1800*, p. 125.

⁷⁷ Browne p. 30.

the Catholic church, did the Roman law never reassert itself. Of course this did not mean that the involved parties were not influenced by their families. It would be wrong to think they were absolutely free to marry whoever they wished though certainly from a legal point of view they were not bound to anyone and this eventually led to the diffusion of the idea of companionate marriage, based on companionship and the Romantic ideal of mutual completion of each other.

However, this greater freedom was theoretically known rather than practically enjoyed, as we have said. It was more important to have the support and authorization of one's family to marry than the legal right to do so against their wish as soon as they were of age. Furthermore, there was greater freedom also for the family than there was in other countries which had stronger patriarchal systems than England did. If on the one hand children were not obliged to obtain their parents' consent concerning the choice of their partner, on the other hand in case of divorce or separation, parents had no responsibility to shelter or maintain members of their family. This made marrying, especially without parental blessings, a high-risk strategy, particularly pronounced for women. Marriage cut the last strong links to family, divorced women were alone after a separation and still under the power of their husband. The well-known proverb 'England is a paradise for women' may have been inspired by the fact that they were allowed to marry for love instead of being kept 'under lock and key' as in Italy, according to another common belief. However, the proverb did not consider the fact that marital property laws in England were more severe than the more egalitarian system in continental countries, as Fletcher points out. There was even a text, *The Hardship of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* of 1735 that went into details about how hard English law was on married women, and compared it with points where the Roman law treated them better. Furthermore, the merciless contempt of society was even worse than legal persecution for many wives, as Byron said himself: 'But in old England when a young bride errs, / Poor thing, Eve's was a trifling case to hers' (*DJ XII*, 64).

Seen in this light, Annabella's decision appears even braver, but once again the difference between law and real life is evident – she did not marry without her parents' consent and was sure they would take her back and protect her if problems arose.

Greater freedom as usual involves also greater responsibility, as English ladies knew very well. In addition to that, it should not be supposed that England was a liberal paradise for women because of these unusually modern laws. On the contrary, as Daniela Hacke explains, after the Protestant Reformation, which somehow always set England apart from other European countries, women had even fewer options apart from marriage. 'With the abolition of convents, the closing of brothels and the acceptance of a celibate priesthood, reformers made marriage

the only institution in which women could lead honourable Christian lives.⁷⁸ At least the idea of the female role in it was changing - women were starting to be considered as independent thinking beings, not sexually voracious half-animals without a soul, as was believed from the Middle Ages down to the Elizabethan Era. The cumulative impact of bio-medical discourses and the development of the notion of womanhood were combining to desexualise women in the eyes of men, making them less threatening. Chastity, i.e. the lack of sexual desire, became an inner virtue women could aspire to by perceiving themselves as 'desexualised embodiments of spiritual value.' Eighteenth century feminists, Alice Browne points out, insisted exactly on women's dignity as responsible individuals capable of deciding and yearning for social rights. Although the way to complete equality was still very long, politically and socially women were slowly assuming a less secondary role, especially in Britain, where the law was more favourable for females.

From Roman to Romantic, the passage of the marital relationship from subordinated to the will of others into important personal choice was slow but steady. It became typical for modern Western society and changed the nature of marriage as well as men's and women's roles in it.

Taking up Stone again, the two separate archetypes of sexual conduct gradually changed between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. The first was the conjugal tie for the procreation of a male heir, in which, as Lady Blessington expressed, 'Love resigns his votaries to the dominion of reason'⁷⁹. The second was the extra-marital liaisons exclusively for love, companionship and sexual pleasure. These two opposites slowly merged into one during the eighteenth century thanks to Romantic ideas of companionate marriage and the collapse of moral Puritanism. The 'general secularization of society led to the release of libido from the age old-restraints of Christianity [...] and the emerging of a new desire for pleasure within its scope.'⁸⁰ Unfortunately, this libido did not find satisfaction in marriage for a long time and from the court to the higher classes of society, most gentlemen engaged in what was euphemistically called 'gallantry'. Even in *Don Juan* there is a reference to this widespread use: 'The flesh is frail, and so the soul undone./What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,/Is much more common where the climate's sultry' (I, 63).

Regardless of the climate, adultery and bastards were common not only for men, who offered a way of ascending (at least financially) in society, for many poor, well-bred girls by making them their mistress as happened to Lady Blessington, but also for wives, as we have seen in the cases

⁷⁸ Daniela Hacke: *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice*, p. 15.

⁷⁹ Lovell: *LBC*, p. 31

⁸⁰ Stone p. 528.

of Lady Oxford and Caroline Lamb. Vic Gatrell argues that freethinking libertine principles, allied to unaccountable wealth and privilege in high circles, influenced women's behaviour to the point that female adultery was 'esteemed a fashionable [vice] rather than crime'⁸¹ and loose morals continued to be tolerated in the country. The double standard of a husband having the duty to provide for his illegitimate children, while demanding from his wife to be faithful, was difficult to justify. The courts upheld gifts and legacies to mistresses, Browne⁸² states, without suggesting that their status was comparable to wives. This was the case in England as well as abroad; especially in France and Italy it led to famous excesses in libertinism on a professional scale.

The term *libertine* is often used inappropriately, as Schneider points out, since it had a long history and various uses. From the Latin *libertus* it indicated people of free mind and principles, who followed the Epicurean philosophy or other current of thoughts that were sometimes in discordance with the Church. That is why libertines were often associated with atheism and immorality, in particular because unlike Epicureans, they did not aspire to satisfy all pleasures of the body, but exceed in those concerning sex without limitations of any kind. In general it has assumed a rather negative meaning describing people who seek their own libertinage instead of the real liberty of body and soul to be found in religion. Schneider⁸³ lists the four great charges against libertinism, which help us to understand that they were more than seducers like Valmont or Casanova. Firstly, important Christian thinkers criticized and condemned libertinage for its attempting a rational apology of religion; secondly, for being a sort of revolt against the order of the Church; thirdly, for its intellectual curiosity; and only lastly, for the connection between spiritual and carnal sins. In the most common use of the term, libertine describes a reckless immoral man of no principles, who seduces and ruins women for his pleasure. However, even this seduction is not as straightforward as may be supposed. Casanova, for example, was honestly in love with the women he seduced as long as he succeeded in possessing them and even more if he did not. 'Non seduceva per soddisfare un freddo capriccio della ragione, ma per puro piacere di sedurre o, più semplicemente, per il piacere dei sensi.'⁸⁴

In *The Conversation of the Sexes* Roy Roussel makes an important distinction between two kinds of seduction based on a different grade of attachment of the seducer towards the woman. In

⁸¹ Vic Gatrell: *City of Laughter – Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*, p. 357.

⁸² Browne p. 143.

⁸³ Schneider: *Il Libertino – Per una storia sociale della cultura Borghese nel XVI e XVII secolo*, p. 233.

⁸⁴ Federico di Trocchio: *Giacomo Casanova: Pensieri Libertini*, p. 9.

one the man merely pretends to love the woman and as soon as he has conquered her and satisfied his desire, he abandons her adding to his reputation by ruining hers. This cool-headed seduction, generally attributed to the famous libertines such as Valmont in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, is based on the convention that women are 'inevitably' inferior because of their 'natural' susceptibility to feeling and emotion while men are superior and more independent. In many cases this has certainly been true, although there have been as many examples of equally calculating courtesans but they are over shadowed since a man has less to lose than a woman in front of society. In fact, taking up Gatrell again, 'anxieties about reputation never faded; yet many high-born ladies were enmeshed in networks of intrigue and liaisons that were semi-public' and therefore enjoyed a certain independence as long as it conformed to precise social rules.

3.2. The case of Byron

Byron's case is quite peculiar, since most of his friends and critics or biographers are divided on his being a libertine or not. He himself regarded himself as a philanderer but not a libertine, alternating between pride about his conquests and annoyance about them. If there ever was a particularly libertine period of his life, it was during his sojourns abroad as a youth and later in Italy. In fact in England libertinism was falling out fashion, since it was being associated with the nation's political corruption or the collapse of revolutionary France, as Vic Gatrell explains. Moreover, female decorum and the mores were changing, also because women were becoming more influential readers, whose sensibility was shocked by libertinism. On the contrary, in the south it was still a diffused practice. Gatrell belongs to those critics, who give ample resonance to Byron's exuberant sexual life. She calls 1808 the poet's erotic *annus mirabilis*⁸⁵ when he was 'buried in an abyss of sensuality', 'given to harlots, and 'in a state of concubinage' in England as well as in Greece and Turkey, where he had experienced so many sexual adventures with women and young boys, that he boasted to his Cambridge friends to have managed there 'over two hundred *'pl and opt Cs'* (*coitum plenum et opitabilem*) according to their code. These descriptions would make him appear the unavoidable exemplar of libertine, in addition to his youthful chauvinistic assertion (later contradicted by his actions) 'had I fifty mistresses, I should in the course of a fortnight, forget them all, and, if by any chance I ever recollected one, should laugh at it as a dream' (letter to Augusta, October 25th, 1804). However, the heyday of the old ways was nearly vanquished. What happened abroad was not as important as one's reputation at home and Byron definitely challenged public opinion with his numerous scandalous affairs during 1812. Caroline Lamb, Lady Oxford, alleged intercourse with his half-sister Augusta, rumours of misdeeds and violence against his wife Annabella contributed to his being increasingly ostracised until in the end, plagued by debts, slander, separation and his past sins, he fled from England, never to return again. He had to pay for the excesses society had accepted to a certain degree as long as he was famous; but then suddenly it turned its back against him. The disappointment and disillusionment deriving here from later found expression in his comic-libertine epic *Don Juan*, Byron's very own way to redeem himself by a terrible vengeance for what he had suffered. This feeling had brooded in his heart for many years as he told Moore in 1818: 'Do you suppose I have forgotten it [how society treated him]? It has comparatively swallowed up in me every other feeling, and I am only a spectator upon earth, till a tenfold opportunity offers. It may come yet. There are others more to be blamed than *** [Annabella?],

⁸⁵ Gatrell p. 410.

and it is on these my eyes are fixed unceasingly'. This promise he maintained and a few years later the result was thrown in English society's face.

Gatrell adds that

his ilk was laid low by something deeper than a passing spasm of moralizing. A cultural revolution was more like it, and Byron's lament for the shift from cunt to cant was no bad way of describing what had happened. Only after his self-sacrificial death from fever in Missolonghi in 1824, aged thirty-seven, would his reputation be romantically rehabilitated. None would have been more scathing about that hypocrisy than Byron himself.⁸⁶

Indeed judging by his love-life, Byron could easily be classified as a libertine and specimen of that masculine predatoriness which characterized it. However, the decisive element to consider before labelling a philanderer, is not to take into account the number of his lovers but the mode of seduction. By doing so, we might find out that the famous predator was not so predatory after all.

In the case of Byron and Claire, for instance, depending on the point of view and sympathies, she might appear both the prey and the instigator of the seduction and he the predator and the prey. In Grylls's eyes Byron had 'the weakness of a vain man and the cruelty of a sentimentalist. Without the excuse of passion or of pleasure, for the Don Juan *manqué* of Piccadilly Terrace was a half-hearted libertine, he took her, and by the end of April she had become pregnant with child.'⁸⁷ On the contrary Fleming affirms that she 'forced herself on Byron at the time of the separation from his wife, then waylaid him in Switzerland and visited him at the Villa Diodati as often as he would admit her'⁸⁸, bombarding him with hysterical letters in the meantime. He himself explained to Augusta he took her out of pity and exasperation: 'I could not exactly play the Stoic with a woman who had scrambled eight hundred miles to unphilosophize me.'⁸⁹ It is hard to say who really was predator and prey; however she was treated cruelly by him afterwards, and on this most critics agree. Furthermore it resembles a classical seduction more than a mutual affection.

Such is the case in the second of seduction in Roussel's division - the man is touched by a specific woman and wishes to build up an intimacy and identity with her which violates the question of their conventional difference. Actually these differences are merely traditional, since men are not opposed to women and can be as sentimental as they are. If such a degree of interest is reached, there is hope for a longer and abiding union. Byron cannot be defined a

⁸⁶ Gatrell p. 413.

⁸⁷ Grylls p. 58.

⁸⁸ Grylls p. 196.

⁸⁹ Fleming p. 63.

complete libertine, his desire of conquest was probably more similar to the second mode of seduction than the first, especially with high-born ladies. Towards girls from other countries or lower social extraction his behaviour may have been more cold-hearted but never without feeling, though 'after the first heats of passion they were to him pretty playthings and no more', as Claire asserted, and he 'could never agree with any woman of much independence of thought.'⁹⁰ Maybe this dislike of blue-stockings or controlling women was due to his bad experiences with his mother and wife, from which arose the 'great contempt for women' he boasted. This contempt at times was barely hidden and utter, to the point that he envied the Turks for their shutting up women in harems, while he had suffered from the other sex ever since he could remember. 'I began by being jilted, then ended by being unwived. Those are wisest to make no connexion of wife or mistress. The knight-service of the Continent, with or without the *k*, is perhaps a slavery as bad, or worse, than either. An intrigue with a married woman at home, though more secret, is equally difficult to break.'⁹¹ Typical annoyances and complaints of a womanizer, who was rarely constant in his interest. Nonetheless, although he boasted about his philandering, he did not like the appellation of libertine, because it implied a cold-hearted calculation he did not feel any more as the motive for his dealings the older he got. He wrote to Hobhouse: 'As to libertinism I have sickened myself of that, as was natural in the way I went on, and I have at least derived that advantage from vice, to *love* in the better sense of the word' (July 2nd, 1819).

From his youth he had seldom actively sought female company, more often they offered themselves to him and he admitted to Medwin 'You would not think me a Scipio in those days, but you can safely say I never seduced a woman.'⁹² In this instance, a sort of anti-Claire might be presented, the young Frances Wedderburn Webster, towards whom Byron behaved just like an English Casanova apart from the conclusion of the adventure. In 1813 the poet spent some weeks with his friend Webster and his devoted wife, writing to Lady Melbourne detailed accounts of his progresses in courting the demure woman out of idleness and without interest at first, just as a challenge provoked by Webster's 'bullying' comments that 'every woman was his *lawful* prize' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, October 8th, 1813), not knowing how to value what was his. For want of other seducers, he justified himself, the poet decided to admire what the husband did not and to take up the seduction, which was rendered easier by Frances's already knowing his fame of philanderer and being, like so many other young wives, tremendously bored by her marriage. Still, despite palpitating and highly erotic forbidden declarations of love

⁹⁰ Gordon p. 201.

⁹¹ *Medwin* p. 73.

⁹² *Medwin* p. 67.

in Webster's billiard room, she was a serious and truly virtuous platonic girl, as he repeatedly underlined while hoping to overcome her spiritual system of love. Byron had to play the field and, to his surprise, his attachment grew as he was making love to her. What had started as a libertine pastime, had become a genuine affection, to the point that love prevailed over passion. 'I spared her', he told Lady Melbourne, even if the situation was exceptionally favourable, because 'I love her. If I did not, and much too, I should have been more selfish on the occasion before mentioned' (October 17th, 1813). This behaviour was certainly not that of the cold-hearted seducer, rather than Valmont and Lovelace, Byron acted as a gentleman of feeling. A pity this story was less renowned than many other more or less exaggerated stories about his rakish life.

Too easily had the world accepted the picture of himself he presented through his fictional characters, his exaggerated accounts of extravagant adventures and the ambiguous hints he laid himself, to the point that uncountable invented rumours circulated about him, making him often worse than what he was. Again to Medwin he complained 'it has been alleged that murder is my instinct; and to make innocence my victim and my prey, part of my nature.' In his eyes it was quite the opposite as he ironically said: 'I would like to know *who* has been carried off – except poor dear *me*. I have been more ravished myself than anybody since the Trojan war' (Letter to Hoppner, October 29th 1819). And indeed, what else should he have done, since there are 'few Josephs in the world, and many Potiphar's wives'⁹³? Willing they were for sure but to what extent were they seducers or seduced, predator or prey? It appears that his fame as a predator made him the most sought after prey of more or less predatory women, who were attracted by his bad reputation and from whom he soon struggled to get free by ultimately leaving England.

⁹³ Medwin p. 69.

4. Italian women

4.1. Venice

Mediterranean countries, France and Italy, where the poet lived nearly as long as in England, were the centre of libertinism and settings for erotic literature. Casanova's memoirs for example suggest how easy-going the sexual morality was among the upper classes in the eighteenth century and it is not a coincidence he lived in Venice. In Byron's times, when the Republic had just lost its independence to Austria, the feverish and intricate dissipations of illicit love were no longer openly displayed but Venice still preserved some of that atmosphere of adventure, though the gaiety, reflected in Goldoni's plays, had vanished. The noble patricians led nocturnal lives unsuspected by their families in obscure apartments, mainly to enjoy the superior beauty of women from lower classes compared to that of the noble wives at home. A fact immediately noticed and a method soon followed by Byron and other visitors too, but hardly seen with a good eye in their home countries. Shelley for example, was quite shocked by Italian women and could not understand how his friend found pleasure in their company. In a letter to Mary he wrote:

Italian women are perhaps the most contemptible of all who exist under the moon; the most ignorant, the most disgusting, the most bigoted, the most filthy. Countesses smell so of garlic that an ordinary Englishman cannot approach them. Well, [ord] B[yrone] is familiar with the lowest sort of these women [...]. He allows fathers and mothers to bargain with him for their daughters, and though this is common enough in Italy, yet for an Englishman to encourage such sickening vice in a melancholy thing. (August 23rd, 1818)⁹⁴

Not all were as disgusted as Shelley by the corruption and dirt of Venice. In the common imaginary this city remained the emblem of luxury, decadence and peculiar gender morality under the direct control of the authorities, through which it had won itself an international reputation for nurturing openness, tolerance at the social level and lax morals in the economic and political interest of the Serenissima.

La Repubblica non istima opportuno di rimediare a questo disordine, nè di arrestare il corso del libertinaggio. Essa lo prende al contrario per malattia necessaria allo stato, la quale, come un soporifero, attuta l'umore bollente della gioventù, e debilita non solo le forze di quelli il cui naturale impetuoso sarebbe temibile, ma serve ancora a vuotare le borse dei forestieri, che l'amore di una vita licenziosa attira numerosi a Venezia. Inoltre il popolo, nutrito nella mollezza, non aspira a novità, sicché la gioventù nobile, dedicandosi interamente alla caccia dei piaceri, non intraprende cose pregiudizievoli allo stato, e aspetta senza impazienza le cariche che l'età, e la nascita procurano a essa nella Repubblica. (Tassini, p. 95).

⁹⁴ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (1964) Clarendon Press, Oxford, II p. 36; found in Page, *Byron – Interviews and Recollections* p. 52.

Thus libertinism, as long as it was under the control of the Republic, which managed the activities of *meretrici* and *cortigiane* and granted them protection, had many advantages – to calm down young boiling spirits, who would otherwise turn to Revolutionary thoughts, to keep the patricians pleased and to attract rich foreigners and their money to the city.

Women were divided into three social categories, as can be read in *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice*, according to the value criteria of patriarchal Venetian society: *signora* (lady), *cortigiana* (courtesan) and *meretrice* (prostitute). The number of prostitutes had always been very high in Venice, making up a great part of the lowest social rank and managed by the authorities. This widespread, organized reality proved advantageous to patrician men both married and unmarried, Italian or foreigners. Byron, who had a special casino for his nocturnal meetings, took advantage of this custom without disturbing its delicate balance. Giorgio Tassini in *Il Libertinaggio in Venezia dal secolo XIV alla caduta delle Repubbliche* explains: ‘gli stranieri hanno una piena libertà in Venezia riguardo ai loro divertimenti, purché si astengano d’immischiarsi ove i patrizi prendono un interesse particolare, perché allora andrebbe a rischio di non ritrovarvi il proprio conto’⁹⁵.

Definitely fewer in number were the courtesans, whose situation was half-way between that of a prostitute and of a lady, neither virgin nor housewife. They were ‘free’ women, not least sexually, creative and intellectual. Of course they had certain rules to follow, for example they were not allowed to wear pearls or be seen along the Canal Grande, but still enjoyed great freedom and a special but ambivalent status in society. The rights they had were less if compared to those of a lady, but they were more independent, especially concerning the choice of their lovers. A courtesan had her own apartment, paid for by some admirer, and admitted only a little selection of aristocrats there, who would compensate her with valuable gifts. She would not be forced to take up any affair she did not like. This may seem the opposite of what happened to many a high-born girl, who was under the strict control of their male relatives and had to marry according to their wishes and not hers. But as many of Goldoni’s plays show us, women were definitely able to fight for their interests, to the point that men felt sometimes surrounded by a female conspiracy. As Olwen Hufton points out, the conniving older servant, who helps her young mistress to trick her old, unwanted suitor and organises secret meetings with the lover of her choice, often contributing to a happy ending, ‘had a long literary history and perhaps reached its apogee in the eighteenth century in the hands of [...] Carlo Goldoni’.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Giuseppe Tassini: *Cenni storici e leggi circa il libertinaggio in Venezia dal secolo XIV alla caduta della Repubblica*, p. 92.

⁹⁶ Olwen Hufton: *The Prospect Before Her – A History of Women in Western Europe*, p. 48.

The literary *topos* probably romanticised and enlarged female power, which was less in reality, but it is not too improbable that maids and nurses, who had had to marry against their inclinations, would help young girls to be happier than they had been. On the opposite, however, greedy old women could also exploit the beauty of their helpless and low-born protégés and run brothels, ruining their sisters instead of being united against male supremacy, they made money from. The power of elder women was ambivalent.

Ambivalent was also the famous double standard to which most patricians conformed to – Venetian aristocracy founded its moral values on the chastity and purity of the *donne oneste*, who were responsible for the good name of the family, while men were allowed and even expected to seek pleasure elsewhere. This double standard blended Puritanism for women and permissiveness for men in a peculiar but well-working equilibrium, known also abroad. In England the opinion that marriage and patriarchy were interconnected was not that different. For some, as Antony Fletcher⁹⁷ asserts, patriarchy rested upon marriage, which meant that the weaker sex had to accept being subjected to men in order to preserve the establishment ‘upon which the order of society doth so much depend’. And since men’s adultery does not threaten blemishing the blood of the family while women’s does, the double standard was present and accepted in England as well, from an early stage. Browne⁹⁸ sums up that for British moralists a husband’s infidelity was not important, a wife’s a catastrophe. Women had to bear it patiently and must not be tempted into thinking their husband’s infidelity justified their own. This unfair principle could be and was easily attacked by feminists in theory and secretly lived out in practice as has been seen. Taking up Browne again: ‘aristocratic women had considerable freedom once they were married; at the end of the century, moralists criticised the fact that adultery in women was tolerated more in practice than pre-marital sex, when religious and ethical principle suggested it should be treated more severely.’⁹⁹ The whole issue of love and marriage rarely coexisting in the same union for English as well as Italian women was brilliantly summed up by Byron himself: ‘they transfer marriage to adultery and strike the *not* out of that commandment. The reason is, that they marry for their parents, and love for themselves’ (Letter to Murray, February 21st, 1820).

⁹⁷ Anthony Fletcher: *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800*, p. 389.

⁹⁸ Browne p. 50.

⁹⁹ Browne p. 141.

4.2. Comparing Italian and English women

Byron's vision of Italy changed over time. His first impressions were profoundly romantic and full of his juvenile ideals. During his journey towards Italy, about which we can read in the third canto of *Childe Harold*, Byron felt the inspiration and influence of the landscapes and people about him very deeply. As he said himself while writing he was 'nearly mad between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, unquenchable love, unutterable thoughts, and the nightmare of my guilt.'¹⁰⁰ This feeling most certainly did not refer to his ill-treatment of Claire as much as to his haunting forbidden passion for Augusta. In the canto he tried to embody all his contrasting and dynamic feelings in a single word: Lightning. His most important experiences in life – success, love – were actually like flashes, short and intense. Once in Venice, he sought to distract his mind from desolation and gloomy thoughts by plunging into a vortex of pleasure of such a sort that Medwin jokingly said 'I suppose, when you left England, you were Childe Harold, and at Venice a Don Giovanni, and Fletcher your Leporello.'¹⁰¹ At which Byron could just laugh and agree.

By the time of his conversations with Medwin and Lady Blessington several years later, he had developed a more comprehensive and detailed impression of Italian customs, which puzzled him the more he tried to make them out. His numerous and different love-affairs with Italian women of all classes gave him access to a cultural knowledge no tourist could achieve, as he was proud to underline:

I should know something of the matter, having had a pretty general experience among their women, from the fisherman's wife up to the *Nobil' Donna*, whom I serve [Teresa]. Their system has its rules, and its fitness, and decorums. (Letter to Murray, February 21st, 1820).

Murray, Byron's editor in England, wanted to exploit the poet's insight in Italian life, by making him write a book about the exotic customs of a country his audience would be extremely interested in. Indeed, even for an 'expert' like Byron, who spent many years in different parts of Italy, there was something totally unfamiliar for an Englishman, which never made him feel completely at home, though he tried to be more involved in national life than most British travellers. Still, he felt that writing a book about Italian habits would be like betraying the faith his hosts had honoured him with and he never consented to the request of revealing the secrets of one country to another because he knew they would and should always remain a mystery. Neither in England nor in Italy did the morals meet the figure of the aloof and detached hero which filled his heart with a dark loneliness no mistress could dispel. To Teresa he described

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Longford: *Byron*, p. 136.

¹⁰¹ *Medwin* p. 54.

himself as 'a foreigner, far from the ways of thought and behaviour of my fellow-countrymen,'¹⁰² which he had not appreciated but at least knew how to deal with.

To Murray he wrote rather dispiritedly: 'Their moral is not your moral - their life is not your life – you would not understand it – it is not English nor French – nor German – which you would understand – the Conventual education – the Cavalier Servitude - the habits of thought and living are so entirely different, and the difference becomes so much more striking the more you live intimately with them, that I know not how to make you comprehend a people, who are at once temperate and profligate, serious in their character and buffoons in their amusements, capable of impressions and passions which are at once sudden and durable' (February 21st, 1820).

Byron tried to fit in as best he could, taking the Italian lifestyle not too seriously; this was why he was known to be *stravagante*, though he never became a real person to most Italians, apart from a few exceptions. Alone or surrounded by eccentric country-fellowmen he got the feeling that this foreign scenery, however incomprehensible it was, best suited his situation after the disillusionments of England. Yet, Massie¹⁰³ argues, for all the ardour with which he would throw himself into Venetian life, he also displayed a new caution. His Venetian loves might delight, even intoxicate him, but he did not allow his heart to be touched and hurt again. That is why he preferred mistresses who were not his equals, so he could feel free from any kind of responsibility and enjoy their company as pure amusement without commitment. At least until he met Teresa, the only Italian woman of his own class he had an enduring relationship with.

Concerning the differences between Italian and English women he had a more detailed and not utterly impartial opinion about beauty as well as behaviour. From a physical point of view 'it is true that out of one hundred Italian and English [women] you will find thirty of the latter handsome; but there will be one Italian on the other side of the scale who will more than balance the deficit in numbers – one, who like the Florence Venus, has no rival, and can have none in the north.'¹⁰⁴ The well-known issue of quantity and quality.

As for their character, he described Italian women to Lady Blessington as: 'more natural, frank, and good-natured and have none of the affectation, petitesse, jealousy and malice, that characterize our more polished countrywomen. [...] I feel with an Italian woman as if she was a full-grown child, possessing the buoyancy and playfulness of infancy with the deep feeling of womanhood; none of that conventional *maniérisme* that one meets with from the first patrician circles in England' (*LBC* p. 112).

It is not the first time Byron compared the Italians to children or children of the sun; although he loved them for their natural ease at showing their feelings, he also underlined the negative sides of this childish behaviour, such as jealousy: 'Italian women are extremely tenacious and jealous as furies; not permitting their lovers even to marry if they can help it, and keeping them always

¹⁰² Iris Origo: *The Last Attachment – The Story of Byron and Teresa Guiccioli*, p. 164.

¹⁰³ Massie p. 95.

¹⁰⁴ *Medwin* p.24.

close to them in public as in private whenever they can.¹⁰⁵ However, even jealousy is just a sign of how deeply Italians feel. To Medwin Byron said: 'Love is not the same dull, cold, calculating feeling here as in the North. It is the business, the serious occupation of their lives; it is a want, a necessity. Somebody properly defines a woman, "a creature that loves." They die for love... They begin to love earlier, and feel the passion later than the Northern people.'¹⁰⁶ Other characteristics of the violent-tempered Italians struck him, such as the fact that they spoke of their *viscere* or entrails and not of their hearts, as Englishwomen, as seat of their passions. And visceral indeed was his response to their naïveté and their surprising suspension of judgement when love was concerned:

The Italian ethics are the most singular ever met with. The perversion, not only of action, but of reasoning, is singular in the women. It is not that they do not consider the thing itself as wrong, and very wrong, but *love* (the *sentiment* of love) is not merely an excuse for it, but makes it an actual virtue, provided it is disinterested, and not a caprice, and is confined to one object. (Letter to Moore, March 25th, 1817).

Since love was rarely to be found in marriage, it was a woman's right to find it outside of it, on condition that she was faithful and constant to that single one. The relationship between *amorosi* could not even be compared to that between a husband and a wife – the former union was eternal, passionate and exalting, the latter merely legal, social and economic.

Although Byron's close analysis of Italian society and mores shows a genuine interest and deep understanding, there is a sense of superiority in putting Englishmen in the position of austere adults. This attitude may be due to the fact that his Italian lovers were all extremely young and yielding to his will and love without remorse or sense of guilt towards either duty or religion, while in England he had met self-willed and more experienced women in his youth. Or it may be that the circles he was moving in in Italy were different from the intriguing and more aristocratic ones of his home country. J.H. Browne, who met the poet in 1823, shared this opinion about Byron's preference of Italian women:

He frequently reverted to the extreme dissolute conduct and incontinence which reigned among the higher circles in his younger days, observing, that married ladies of that class of society in England were much more depraved than those of the Continent, but that the strict outward regard paid to the observance of morality in the former, led the fair sinners to be more dexterous and cunning in concealing their delinquencies.

He professed to entertain a very indifferent opinion in respect to habitual virtue and constancy in the fair sex; this unfair and severe judgement may probably be ascribed to the tone of society in which his Lordship had so unfortunately in his younger days, and afterwards at Venice indulged;¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Origo, p. 167.

¹⁰⁶ Medwin p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ 'Voyage from Leghorn to Cephalonia with Lord Byron, and a Narrative of a Visit, in 1823, to the Seat of War in Greece', *Blackwood's Magazine*, XXXV (Jan 1834), found in Page, *Byron – Interviews and Recollections* p. 135-6.

In Venice he lived surrounded by people from the lowest levels of Italian populace – harlots, pimps and gondoliers - with whom he could feel powerful and superior but at the same time closer to human feelings and relationships. The girls of good family he got acquainted with were barely more than adults and had little experience of the world and so were even more likely to be tempted by such a renowned womanizer as Byron. He observed how the daughters of Italian gentlemen were brought up in a perverse system of child-bride trade between much elder aristocrats. With some concern he described it to Medwin:

Do you know how a girl is brought up here? Almost from infancy she is deprived of the endearments of home, and shut up in a convent till she has attained a marriageable or marketable age. The father now looks out for a suitable son-in-law. As a certain portion of his fortune is fixed by law to the dower of his children, his object is to find some needy man of equal rank, or a very rich one, the older the better, who will consent to take his daughter off his hands, under the market price. Objections are seldom mad on the part of the young lady [...] she is too happy to get her liberty on any terms, and he her money for her person. There is no love on either side. What happiness is to be expected, or constancy, from such a liaison?¹⁰⁸

Even Shelley, who was not a great friend of Italian women, had to admit that ‘the oppression of the marriage compact, as existing in the laws and opinions of Italy, though less frequently exercised is far severer than that in England.’¹⁰⁹ As an Englishman used to very different customs, Medwin was equally surprised by how little opportunity or liberty women had to choose a husband before marriage contrasted with how easy it was for them to find a lover afterwards. The widespread and perfectly accepted practice of having a *cavalier servente* for the Italian ladies, as well as for their husbands, would have been impossible in England, exactly because of this excess of vanity and hypocrisy. Byron himself asserts this tongue-in-cheek in *Don Juan*:

An English lady asked of an Italian
What were the actual and official duties
Of the strange thing some women set a value on,
Which hovers oft about some married beauties,
Called *cavalier servente* – a Pygmalion
Whose statues warm (I fear, alas, too true ‘tis)
Beneath his art. The dame, pressed to disclose them,
Said, ‘Lady, I beseech you to suppose them.’
(DJ IX, 51)

Once the (sexual, as the extracts lets us suppose) relationship was ended, Italian lovers ‘rejoicing in their recovered liberty are more disposed to indulge in feelings of complacency than hatred’ while in England ‘if persons under such circumstances were to meet, angry glances and a careful avoidance of civility would mark their kind sentiments towards each other’. Anyway, he

¹⁰⁸ Medwin p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (1964) Clarendon Press, Oxford, II p. 57; found in Page, *Byron – Interviews and Recollections*, p. 52.

appreciated the depth and levity of sentiment to be found in the Italians, for whom 'the end of love is not the beginning of hatred' as in England or France 'this may be accounted for from their having less vanity; which is also the reason why they have less ill-nature in their compositions.'¹¹⁰ Vanity hidden by hypocritical behaviour and morality was the major issue with English society – and Caroline Lamb in particular, as has been pointed out - an excessive regard for their feelings combined with an inability to express them naturally without feigning, immediately and intensely, like a flash of lightning, which appears and disappears suddenly.

¹¹⁰ *LBC* p. 177.

4.3. Marianna Segati



Byron was eventually cured from his melancholy, at least for a short time, in the arms of an Italian woman, **Marianna Segati**, who, as Longford affirms, was similar to a lightning-flash herself, and typically jealous like most of the Venetian women of her social class. The wealthy, dashing, gorgeous middle-class twenty-two-year old wife of a linen-draper, with a child and servants, immediately showed interest in her new tenant and started an affair with him shortly after he had come to stay with them. The ‘merchant of Venice’s wife’ had ‘large, black, oriental eyes with that peculiar expression in them... which many of the Turkish women give themselves by tingeing the eyelid’ and her temperament proved to be all her eyes predicted. ‘I cannot describe the effect of this kind of eye, - at least upon me... her natural voice (in conversation I mean) is very sweet; and the naiveté of the Venetian dialect is always pleasing in the mouth of a woman.’ Her greatest merit, apart from her beautiful features and childlike temper, was ‘finding out mine – there is nothing so amiable as discernment.’¹¹¹ She was prepared to cure him from his past sorrows without adding more trouble.

Quennell points out that starting a love affair with a local beauty was part of Byron’s method of settling down – to be loved and believe that he loved in return made him feel at home. This need was more psychological than physical, though his appetite was impetuous: ‘like many other philanderers who make love their business, he exploited his gift of attracting women at least as often as he employed it to gain him pleasure’¹¹², in this he resembles a libertine, with a marked *besoin d’aimer*. Nonetheless, these liaisons were usually of short duration. In Marianna’s case it was different, her charm kept Byron in the ‘greenest island of my imagination’ much longer than he had planned, as he told Moore: ‘I have fallen in love, which, next to falling into the canal [...], is the best or worst thing I could do’ (November 17th 1816). He

¹¹¹ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 70.

¹¹² Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 66.

was indeed deeply in love and happily settled their arrangement conforming to the 'incontinent continental system'; i.e. as he explained in a letter to Augusta:

She is married – and so am I – which is very much to the purpose. We have formed and sworn an eternal attachment, which has already lasted a lunar month, and I am more in love than ever, and so is the lady – at least she says so. She does not plague me (which is a wonder) and I verily believe we are one of the happiest – unlawful couples on this side of the Alps (December 18th 1816).

Their happiness was also made possible by Marianna's husband not seeming to mind Byron's gallant presents of jewellery and diamonds, which she sold and he recklessly bought back, as it was absolutely accepted and widely-known that more or less every lady, although she was required to be chaste and pure, had in fact an *amoroso*. He explained to Murray the state of morals at his time, not very different from those in the Doges' days: 'a woman is virtuous (according to the code) who limits herself to her husband and one lover; those who have two, three, or more, are a little *wild*; but only it is those who are indiscriminately diffuse [...] who are considered as overstepping the modesty of marriage'. A fact not unknown in England but certainly less codified than the Italian idea of virtue, thus summarised: 'there is no convincing a woman here, that she is in the smallest degree deviating from the rule of right or the fitness of things, in having an *Amoroso*: the great sin seems to lie in concealing it, or having more than one; that is, unless such an extension of the prerogative is understood and approved of by the prior claimant' (Letter to Murray, January 2nd, 1817). Seen in this light, Marianna was doing nothing illicit and there was no reason whatsoever to protest, as long as there was no rival. Byron was assured of the lady's faithfulness but found himself unsuspecting prey to another woman's interest and Marianna's subsequent jealousy. In a letter to Thomas Moore of 1817, in which Byron relates how he and Marianna were surprised making love by her husband, he explains that in Venice lovers were ignored by complaisant husbands, who were generally not jealous. Jealousy was more of an issue for women than for men, which shows how things had changed since *Othello*, as Byron himself underlines:

Shakespeare described the sex in Desdemona,
As very fair, but yet suspect in fame,
And to this day from Venice to Verona
Such matters may be probably the same,
Except that since those times was never known a
Husband whom mere suspicion could inflame
To suffocate a wife no more than twenty,
Because she had a 'Cavalier Servente'.
(*Beppo* XVII)

Marianna fought like a lioness when she found her sister-in-law conversing privately with the poet, whom she had visited while his *amorosa* was out. The latter however suddenly walked in and 'after making a most polite courtesy to her sister-in-law and to me, without a single word

seizes her sister-in-law by the hair, and bestows upon her some sixteen slaps, which would have made your ear only ache only to hear their echo. I need not describe the screaming which ensued.' As soon as her rival had been driven out, Marianna made quite a scene in Caroline Lamb style, which lasted for several hours. At this point, as if Goldoni had written the plot, 'in comes - who? Why, Signor Segati... and finds me with his fainting wife upon the sofa.' Not a cause of alarm in Venice, Byron explained to Moore, as the next morning some plausible explanation was produced, and hysterical wife and ruffled husband were quite reconciled: 'how they settled it, I know not, but settle it they did.'

This upsetting scene rather amused him though it certainly threw even more light on his adulterous relationship. He left Venice to travel through Italy and write the fourth and final Canto of *Childe Harold*, but he eventually returned into her arms. He even took her with him in *villeggiatura* to La Mira along the Brenta, after she was released by unknown means from her husband's superintendence. In most cases, unfaithfulness was not a valid enough reason to divorce. Actually, canon law after the Tridentine Council allowed separation only on four principal grounds: cruelty, deep hatred, contagious disease and adultery (Hacke p. 35). However morals in Venice by the time Byron settled there were so relaxed, that adventures like Marianna's were considered little more than a trifle, especially in her position as landlady to many foreign travellers. A later tenant described her as 'a demon of libidinousness and avarice, who intrigued with every resident in the house.'¹¹³ This may sound a little hard against the merry *Locandiera*, she was not acting worse than most other females of her class. As a matter of fact, the perverted sexual mores were a cause of the end of the Republic as Tassini affirms. At worse, since a proper divorce was difficult to obtain especially for members of the lower classes and only the pope could put asunder what God had put together, marital partners separated only temporarily because of 'some secret mistake of the wife (that is adultery) or other.'¹¹⁴ Secrecy was as important as it was in England, though maybe the habit of having or keeping a lover was more widespread in Italy, where passions were free to show as long as certain rules were followed.

The problem of marriage, as a fundamental part of the general welfare, concerned both authority and Church in acting pragmatically to find legal solutions to conflicts between married couples. In addition to that, every class had its own rules, but in general every woman was free to choose an *innamorato*. It was even expected: 'E' di regola che esse [le dame Veneziane] posseggano un amante, e sarebbe una specie di disonore per una dama non tenere un uomo per

¹¹³ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 69.

¹¹⁴ Hacke p. 37.

proprio conto. Ma in questo affare la politica ha una gran parte'¹¹⁵. The lover had to be 'patrizio soltanto' in order to obtain privileges for the lady's condescending husband in exchange for her favours, which besides were not always completely bestowed as we are told by Tassini: 'l'ambasciatore francese conosceva una cinquantina soltanto di dame le quali dormivano coi proprio amanti, mentre le alter ne erano rattenute dal confessore, solito a permettere tutto quanto avessero voluto in somigliante materiale, meno l'articolo essenziale'. The essential article, as it is called, was harder to get the higher one ascended in social rank. However, if personal, religious and moral doubts were surrounded and 'due persone s'intendono, non è impossibile di riuscire a qualche bel colpo col favor della gondola.'¹¹⁶

Precise rules were followed by men as well as women. On the one hand, husbands were supposed to turn a blind eye on their wives' affairs, just as she pretended not to know about his. Violent jealousy might be permitted to the lover, Quennell¹¹⁷ explains, but was ridiculous and unbecoming when displayed by the husband. As long as the couple remained under cover in a sort of ordered promiscuity and did not harm anybody's reputation, family and friends would not interfere either. Byron enjoyed the advantages of such a situation but had difficulties in behaving as a *cavalier servente* was supposed to, shutting his eyes against the beauty of other ladies rather than encounter an explosion of jealousy of his own sweetheart. Blindness was essential on more than one part and the proud aristocrat could not bear to be ruled as an 'amatory appendage' by a woman socially inferior to himself, as he expressed in a letter to Augusta: 'I told my fair one, at setting out, that as to the love and the Cavaliership I was quite of accord, but as to the *servitude* it would not suit me at all' (December 19th, 1816). Only a few years later, with a noblewoman of his same high lineage, did he reluctantly yield to his fate.

On the other hand, it rarely came to duels between men, unless the husband was exceptionally jealous or had to defend his reputation. Italian society disdained concealment and deep passion for its own sake was generally condoned and recognized; thus a different moral code was applied. Most of the time, the cuckold would just take his wife back after a public act of repentance on her side, as happened with the plebeian La Fornarina as well as the aristocratic Teresa Gamba. Interestingly Byron's three Italian muses came from the three social classes society was divided in and his behaviour towards them changed accordingly, as there were different conventions to follow. Marianna was treated with respect, Teresa with reverence and La Fornarina with irony.

¹¹⁵ Tassini p. 104

¹¹⁶ Tassini p. 105.

¹¹⁷ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 54.

4.4. Margherita Cogni – La Fornarina



Coming from a very poor social background, **Margherita Cogni**, known as La Fornarina because of her husband's activity as a baker, soon became Marianna's rival and deposed her with much ado. During the summer of 1817, when Byron was enjoying Madame Segati's company, he met a group of peasant girls while he was riding in the countryside. 'We remarked two as the prettiest we had seen for some time', he wrote. One of them in particular caught his attention for her 'large black eyes, a face like Faustina's, and the figure of Juno – tall and energetic as a Pythoness [...] one of those women who may be made anything' (Letter to Moore, September 19th 1818). She was not only beautiful but also quick-minded and, recognizing the well-known public personage, who was famous for his generosity, she asked him to help her too as he had done with others. To this the poet answered 'Cara, tu sei troppo bella e giovane per aver bisogno del soccorso mio'¹¹⁸ but she insisted and a few days later they met again, chaperoned by another girl, who panicked when she understood she was intended for Hobhouse. The poet explained this behaviour to be typical of unmarried women, since 'here no woman will do anything under adultery' – but Marianna was a different matter. Although Byron was willing to relieve her without conditions, she hesitated in accepting his help without thanking him 'as all married women did: but her husband (a baker) was quite ferocious'. Her fears were dissipated and this fierce product of Venetian slums and backways, as Quennell defines her, assumed a dominant position jealously guarded in the poet's life for two years. Marianna was daunted and crushed by La Fornarina's wild effrontery, which shows all the pride and strength of the lower class against the usurpation of wealthier people. In an explosion of Venetian dialect she answered to his former mistress' threats not to meddle, that their social class did not matter, since neither of them was his wife, neither had more claims over him. '*You are his Donna, and I am his Donna; your husband is a cuckold, and mine another. For the rest what right have you to reproach me? If he prefers what is mine to what is yours, is it my fault?... Do not think to speak to me without*

¹¹⁸ Quennell: *Byron in Italy* p. 85.

a reply because you happen to be richer than I am.’ In any case Marianna, his ‘Antelope’, remained Byron’s regular *amica*, recognized as such by the easy Venetian code, to whom he returned when the ‘Amazon’ was quite untameable. Another example of her plebeian pride and visceral jealousy is told by Byron in a letter to Murray (August 9th, 1819): ‘When I reproached her for snatching Madame Contarini’s mask ... I represented to her that she was a lady of high birth, *una dama* ecc. She answered: “Se Ella è dama, mi son Veneziana” – If she is a lady, I am a Venetian’, showing all the quick-wittedness and eloquence of Goldoni’s young heroines.

After his complicated relationships with high-born ladies, Byron enjoyed the company of a simple, illiterate peasant girl, who was as strong and beautiful as a lioness in her *fazziolo*. She left her husband, who used to beat her, and could not be persuaded to move out from the poet’s Venetian palazzo either by her family, or by the priest or by her amoroso himself. Byron was rather amused and was said to have purchased her for five hundred crowns, though in fact he simply hosted her as a housekeeper and lover as long as she behaved reasonably, enchanted by the ‘flashing eyes’ of *La Boulangère*, as she was ironically called in high society, ‘the baker’s baggage, with bold face and saucy tongue, - the blackguard in petticoats.’¹¹⁹ He wrote to Augusta in 1818 that he did not care much for the town talk, finding himself only ‘a little embarrassed’ by his new acquisition but since she kept his ‘household in rare order’ and ‘the morals of this place are very lax’ to the point that even her relatives complimented her on her choice, he decided he would keep her. He knew how to manage her and could ‘deal with anything but a cold blooded animals such as Miss Milbanke’. Moreover, she flattered his self-love and pleased his love for fun with her whims and all her Venetian characteristics he appreciated in the city as well as the people, such as her family nickname *la Mora*, which he turned into his own ‘Moor of Venice’. However, when her jealousy towards him turned into violence against any other female who came to the house, he had to send her back. She did not care for his having other affairs, be they even hundreds as she declared, as long as he returned to her – and he always did. ‘For two years in the course of which I had more women than I can recount – she was the only one who preserved over me an ascendancy – which was often disputed – and never impaired’ (Letter to Murray, August 1st, 1819). His attraction to her was physically strong and from a psychological point of view, she made him laugh of her slang and buffooneries so much that his anger would soon dissolve into good-natured laughter.

From this curious relationship springs the comedy *Beppo*, about a betrayed husband, which reflects the different attitude towards adultery in Italy compared to England in an ironic way. The real theme, according to Leslie Marchand, ‘was the contrast between the formalities of

¹¹⁹ Gordon p. 155.

England with its hypocritical moral codes and the relaxed freedom which he admired in Italy, even when he found it often ridiculous too'.¹²⁰ Indeed, becoming an interpreter of Italy to England and of England to Italy, with this satire he prepared his audience to what was to come next - *Don Juan*.

11

They've pretty faces yet, those same Venetians,
Black eyes, arched brows, and sweet expressions still;
Such as of old were copied from the Grecians,
In ancient art by moderns mimicked ill;
And like so many Venuses of Titian's.
(The best's at Florence- see it, if ye will,)
They look when leaning over the balcony
Or stepped from out a picture by Giorgione. [...]

15

I said that like a picture by Giorgione
Venetian women were, and so they *are*,
Particularly seen from a balcony,
(For beauty's sometimes best set off afar)
And there just like a heroine of Goldoni,
They peep from out the blind; or o'er the bar;
And truth to say, they're mostly very pretty,
And rather like to show it, more's the pity!

16

For glances beget ogles, ogles sighs,
Sighs wishes, wishes words, and words a letter,
Which flies on wings of light-heeled Mercuries,
Who do such things because they know no better;
And then, God knows what mischief may arise,
When love links two young people in one fetter.
Vile assignations, and adulterous beds,
Elopements, broken vows, and hearts, and heads.
(*Beppo*)

It was indeed usual in Venice to see prostitutes leaning at their windows to allure costumers and even respectable women could from time to time find an admirer in such a manner.

As much as he liked Margherita for her passionate temper and sanguine behaviour, Byron felt no particular attachment or responsibilities towards a simple plebeian. He attributed her uncontrolled passion to the ignorance typical of the lower class, where a lack of education gave way to Medea-like behaviours in what he fondly but scornfully called 'this kind of animal'. Still he admitted to be sure he would have preferred Medea to any other kind of woman, as his frequent relationships with uncontrollable mistresses show, and that is why he indulged with La Fornarina longer and more openly than with any other plebeian. She represents the lowest

¹²⁰ *Byron e la cultura veneziana*, p. 93.

social class with no rights at all, especially when a famous and wealthy lord like Byron is involved. Not even her husband or her family dared say anything or oppose to his decision to keep her or turn her away, being in the more powerful position he could do as he pleased. While Marianna represents the wealthy lady with some prerogatives, poor Margherita could only feel honoured that her love had been at least taken into consideration. There was not much more to be expected and she played all her cards to maintain her exceptionally fortunate position as long as possible, fulfilling her live wire potential. Even the gondolieri used to gossip about the '*giovinotto inglese stravagante*' and his life at Palazzo Mocenigo where the Baker's wife was installed and ruled the household with the 'tenderness of a tiger'. For some time she was even in charge of little Allegra, who was to meet Teresa too in later years, the only mistress of her father who showed her some affection. After a few more scenes La Fornarina was definitely cast out by doctor's orders when Byron's health had broken down and he could neither laugh at her nor rescue her when in a last effort to secure his affection, she flung herself into the water bleeding from a self-inflicted dagger wound. Since all his servants were afraid of her and paralysed at this scene, she had to be fished out by one of his gondoliers and return to her husband. No wonder they were talking about her.

As for the poet, he had decidedly enough of being at the centre of violent scenes in public. His mother had flung the tongs at him in the presence of his friends; Caroline had tried to cut her veins at a ball, as we have seen; La Fornarina had slashed his picture with a bread-knife and made such a dramatic exit, that the rumours reached even Geneva: "'young lady seduced – subsequent abandonment – leap into the grand canal – her being in the hospital of *fous* in consequence". I should like to know who was nearest being mad a "*fou*" and be damned to them. Don't you think me in the interesting character of a very ill used gentleman?' (Letter to Hoppner, October 29th, 1819). He decidedly had enough and was glad to get rid of her, as he preferred his lovers to be gentle as antelopes, timid as gazelles, more similar to Teresa – an outstanding woman in his love-life, for whom he might not have been ready before crossing swords with other fiery tempered Italian women.

4.5. Teresa Gamba, Countess Guiccioli



Teresa Gamba, very young wife of the Conte Guiccioli of Ravenna. To Lady Blessington Byron praised her as ‘a small, fair, delicate bashful person much more resembling a British subject than one of any Southern nation.’¹²¹ One may be curious to know why.

After a brief Venetian acquaintance in April 1819, he fell in love with the 19-year-old little beauty, who could recite Tasso and Dante by heart, as she had received an exceptional education for a girl of her time. Jump describes her as ‘a cultivated aristocrat who combined a lively sense of fun with a deep-rooted sentimentalism.’¹²² However, that was certainly not what struck him at first. She was to be his longest and strongest love after Augusta. It may seem strange that a very young and rather simple lady, described by him as ‘not fit’ for salons because she had ‘no tact’ and ‘answers loud’, would succeed where so many other women had failed – to possess Byron’s heart until his death: ‘You sometimes tell me that I have been your first love – and I assure you that you shall be my last passion.’

Byron courted and possessed Teresa in a very short time, as she said herself: ‘I was strong enough to resist at that first encounter... next day.. my strength gave way’¹²³. She was the typical resourceful wife of an elderly man she been forced to marry for wealth and title since she came from a noble but numerous family, which could not provide for her. But ‘young Italian women are not satisfied with good old men’¹²⁴ as Byron said. Furthermore ‘an unmarried Girl naturally

¹²¹ *LBC* p. 48.

¹²² Jump p. 39.

¹²³ Origo p. 40.

¹²⁴ Gordon p. 128.

wishes to be married: if she can marry and love at the same time it is well, but at any rate she must love' (Letter to Murray, May 18th, 1819). Loving outside of marriage for noblewomen meant having a *cavalier servente*.

As Quennell affirms 'it was his first experience of that peculiarly Italian institution – the triangular relationship of husband and wife and lover, founded on self-interest but trimmed with sentiment. At a social distance, such households had often amused him [as was the case with Marianna and Margherita] and he had observed how smoothly and decorously they appeared to work – the husband, as soon as jealousy had gone the way of passion politely resigning his function to some acceptable lover (on the understanding that the lover was to maintain his dignity and do nothing to lower his wife's credit in their friends' esteem), the lover submitting to a voluntary servitude in return for privileges from which the regular consort preferred to abdicate. These arrangements might last a season or endure a lifetime' (*Byron in Italy*, p. 150).

Byron knew this Italian practice indeed, it was a way to legitimize adulterous affairs in front of society quite different from anything he had ever experienced in England, though the northern country had its code of gallant behaviour as well. With Marianna he was not ready to subdue to that servitude, but on the other hand he wanted to stay in Italy and even dreamed of settling down, tired of promiscuous concubinage. Teresa seemed the perfect companion, but she was a married noblewoman and had to respect conventions. The elderly Count Guiccioli, who was at his third marriage, had seven children and was said to have assassinated two or more people, was certainly a puzzling and contradictory character. He did not seem to mind his wife's having a young Italian gentleman of his own rank, position and religion as *cavalier servente*, but with Byron the case was different. 'At first he [Guiccioli] winked at our intimacy; but at length made an exception against me as a foreigner, a heretic, and Englishman, and what was worse than all, a liberal.'¹²⁵ This tolerance did not stop even when the poet followed them from Venice to Ravenna following a pursuit that was evident and known to everyone. Guiccioli benefited of Byron's large fortune by constantly borrowing money and was less concerned with his rival's reputation as philanderer than his objectionable political opinions, though he was nonetheless interested in a foreign Lord's protection. For reasons that were incomprehensible to the Englishman, the Count admitted him freely into his mansion, to the point that the poet even shared their house in Ravenna and the cuckold's daily hour of siesta was turned into the lovers' favourite rendezvous. The only explanation for such behaviour in Byron's eyes was 'that he is completely governed by her [Teresa], - for that matter, so am I. The people here don't know what to make of us, as he had a character of jealousy with all his wives.'¹²⁶ It all happened very quickly; the poet knew how Italian marriage in high circles worked and had always avoided engaging his passions in an adulterous relationship, but in Teresa's case it was different. To

¹²⁵ Medwin p.22.

¹²⁶ Gordon p. 152.

Moore he wrote: 'I only meant to be a *cavalier servente* and had no idea it would turn out a Romance in the Anglo fashion'. By this he expresses his own surprise at developing a strong bond to an Italian woman, whom until then he had only considered as simple children to get pleasure from: 'She is neither ignorant nor a fool but really well educated & clever but [they speak] like Children – when first out of [their] convents – and after all this is better than an English blue-stocking' (May 8th, 1820). Clearly he enjoyed the advantages of having a serious, Anglo-like relationship with a clever, passionate and married girl: 'a sort of Italian Caroline Lamb, except she is much prettier, and not as savage. But she has the same red-hot head, the same noble disdain of public opinion, with the superstructure of all that Italy can add to such a natural disposition' (Letter to Kinnaid, April 24th, 1819). Most importantly, she did not expect more from him than a sanctioned lover by her side and the sympathizing world was liberal. Still, the duties and behaviour governed by the strict code of Serventism were not indifferent and heavily felt by him while she reassure him that this position 'did not in the least expose him to criticism, since it was allied, or could be allied, to the most immaculate and respected reputation of all three people concerned.'¹²⁷ A small consolation, the best he could do was to focus on the ludicrousness of the situation he was in the middle of before he could realize it, as he said in one of his letters to Hobhouse:

I am not tired of Italy – but a man must be a Cicisbeo and a singer in duets and a Connoisseur of operas – or nothing here – I have made some progress in all these accomplishments – but I can't say I don't feel the degradation. – Better be a[n] unskilful planter – and an awkward settler – better be a hunter – or anything than a flatterer of fiddlers – and a fan-carrier of a woman. - I like women – God he knows – but the more their system develops upon me, the worse it seems. Polygamy here is completely female... I have been an intriguer, a husband, a whoremonger, and now I am a Cavalier Servente – by the holy! It is a strange sensation (October 3rd, 1819).

Eventually both men got tired of the degrading situation. Guiccioli, after having surprisingly allowed her to pass the summer months in Venice and La Mira alone with Milord, suddenly demanded that Teresa should not see him again, not even at her parents' house. Byron, on the other side, felt the weight of a system that imposed 'a thousand times more restraint and slavery than marriage ever imposed, even in the most moral countries'¹²⁸ and tried to split up with Teresa more than once but it all led to nothing. Both lovers had been blind to conventions and too deeply involved to get out of it without scandal. Furthermore they had no wish to do so, casting aside reason to enjoy their bliss.

Teresa answered her brother's worries thus: Why should I not love such a friend? The feelings I have vowed to him are stronger than all arguments, and, in loving Lord Byron as I love him, I do not

¹²⁷ Origo p. 147.

¹²⁸ LBC p. 180.

think I am offending the holy laws of God. You [Pietro] ask me to give up this friendship; but why? Is it because of the Count? But it is by his wish that Byron is here. Is it because of what the World will say? But this World, whose acquaintance I have scarcely made, I have I think, already appraised... And what would the World give me in return, to make up for the sacrifice I should make? ... Are you asking in the name of my peace, of my happiness? But where should I henceforth find happiness without him? (Origo p. 76).

No argument could change the young girl's mind, neither social nor religious; she found excuses to keep her lover by her side and he was equally undisposed to split up with her, though his reflections were of a different and more melancholic sort. He was grateful for her devotion but getting weary and intellectually lonely, since his passion was devouring him and he had even renounced to complete *Don Juan* as she wished. He wrote to Murray:

I have to do with a woman rendered perfectly disinterested by her situation in life, and young and amiable and pretty – in short as good, and at least as attentive as anything of the sex can be, with all the advantages and disadvantages of being scarcely twenty years old and only two out of her Romagnuolo convent at Faenza. But I feel – and I feel it bitterly – that a man should not consume his life at the side, and on the bosom of a woman, and a stranger; that even the recompense, and it is much, is not enough, and that this Cicisbean existence is to be condemned. But I have neither the strength of mind to break my chain, nor the insensibility which would deaden its weight. (August 23rd, 1819).

It is hard to understand what tied Byron to Teresa but surely the bond was strong, whether it was because he felt responsible for her, desired a more serious commitment after his Venetian adventures, or rejoiced in having an adoring admirer faithful to death. Some suggest he was simply not ready to leave the only woman with whom, apart from Augusta and some servants, he could cast off his neurotic self-consciousness or just felt entangled in a too complicated and foreign affair. Even though she tried to be as pleasing as possible, she was not an Englishwoman, something familiar a heart longs for when it has had enough of superficial and exotic intercourse with women of no repute. Nonetheless, he clung to her and she to him like two birds of opposite breed in one cage, in Mary Shelley's words¹²⁹, 'there they are – and what is there better to do?' The better thing to do would have been to be more careful.

Their thoughtlessness made them act too boldly – Byron and Teresa were surprised in an inn of Venice together while Count Guiccioli was still in Venice and for the ladies of the city this broke the laws of correct Serventismo. They must have lost their head completely to show their liaison so openly. A serious love-affair met less tolerance than Byron's sordid adventures because it was not in accordance with the tacit rules of the system; these rules had to be followed until the whole business was reduced in the poet's eyes 'to a kind of discipline or game at hearts, which admits few deviations.. The exact fidelity from a lover as a debt of honour; while they pay the husband as a tradesman, that is, not at all. You hear a person's character, male or female,

¹²⁹ Medwin p. 21.

canvassed, not as depending on their conduct to their husbands or wives, but to their mistress or lover.¹³⁰

That explains why he was eventually the cause of Teresa's divorce. Guiccioli had enough of being laughed at as the cuckold and forbade every kind of intercourse between the lovers and confined his wife to a monastic life inside her house. Unexpectedly, Ruggero Gamba, Teresa's father did not ask his daughter to fulfil her wifely duties but, as Annabella's father had done some years before though for very different reasons, dispatched a formal petition to the Pope that Teresa be granted a decree of separation from her exacting husband. Byron was very close to her family, especially to Teresa's brother Pietro, who introduced him to the liberal Carboneria movement and followed him in his expedition to Greece, after his family was exiled from Ravenna for his connections to the revolutionary anti-Austrian circles. The separation was granted, much to Teresa's advantage, and she lived for a few happy months with Byron on her father's estate. The romance did them both much good, little Allegra was taken care of, the poet found time to write under the influence of his blonde mistress' company until Count Guiccioli struck back and Teresa had to return to her husband or flee. Byron persuaded her to go back, despite her protestations, following her relatives' advice since 'an *elopement* in Italy is the devil; worse even than with us, because it is superogation, and shows a headlong character.'¹³¹ A headlong character they both had, but for once they yielded to convention. They were soon to be reunited, after the definite divorce for which Teresa had to abandon the papal territories or else choose between staying with the Count or being placed in a convent. To Byron's eyes she became a victim both of marital and clerical tyranny, for which he was immensely grateful and even a little flattered: 'being of a country where morals are no better than in England, (though elopements and divorces a rare – and *this* made an uncommon noise [...])' (Letter to Augusta, October 5th, 1821). This made their bond tighter and he felt there was no escape. When he even just suggested he might leave, he was immediately summoned by Ruggero Gamba to his beloved daughter's bed where she lay ill –with her accustomed skill in so doing at useful moments - and asked to see her lover. If not for that, he might have gone back to England as was his plan. Her influence was deep indeed; she proved he was not as unmanageable by a sensible woman as might be supposed - quite the contrary, no man was so easily led, as long as he was not driven. He felt it with surprise - his heart now belonged more to her than to Augusta, who had wished he would come back. As he told her when sending her some of his locks touched with grey:

¹³⁰ Origo p. 165.

¹³¹ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 165.

But this is “positively the last time of performance” (as the playbills say), or of my getting into such scrapes for the future. Indeed – I have had my share. But this is a finisher. So you see that I have closed as Papa *began*; and *you* will probably never see me again as long as you live. Indeed, you don’t deserve it, for having behaved so coldly, when I was ready to have sacrificed everything for you... I am more attached to her than I thought possible to be to any woman after three years – (except on, and who was she. Can you guess?). If Lady B. would but please to die, and the Countess G.’s husband, we should probably have to marry – though I would rather *not*, thinking it the way to hate each other – for all people whatsoever. (Colburn Mayne p. 293-294)

Their sweet correspondence in English and Italian testifies to the deep attachment on both sides. Teresa came to replace Guss in his heart and even made him consider the idea of marriage, though it was still a dreadful one for him. On her side, the fact that she divorced her husband and lived in exile for the rest of her life shows how much she loved Byron, who on his side never forgot what she had done for him. It is interesting to notice that even in Catholic Italy of the time, divorces were not uncommon. Of course they were a prerogative of the aristocrats since the pope himself had to decide on the validity of the decision, but still at least noble women, had nearly the same freedom as in England, where divorce was a mere juridical and not ecclesiastical matter. Still she always needed male protection, either of her husband or her father, since it was impossible for a gentlewoman to provide for herself. Surprisingly in that instance women from lower classes had more independence and entrepreneurship, though still their position was far from free. The most important thing was as usual, what the public opinion thought, because it was to that that laws confirmed, not the other way round.

It was not a complete victory for Teresa, however. She was exiled first from the papal territories and later followed her family into exile for their connections to the *Carboneria*. Byron helped the family in distress until he left for Greece, with the promise to come back. This choice was not dictated by his having had enough of Teresa but of women, i.e. life for the poet, in general. It was hard to admit he was ‘less capable than ever of those nameless attentions that all women, above all, Italian women, require.’¹³² He felt old and tired and hoped a new adventure in Greece could revive him or give him the coup de grace.

Before that however he moved with the Gamba family from Pisa to Leghorn and after another exile from the Tuscan territories, to Genoa. In every city he introduced his sweetheart to some of his English acquaintances - the Shelleys, Trelawny and Lady Blessington. It is fascinating to see how small the world was for English aristocrats, who travelled throughout Europe with extreme ease, finding in every country a salon full of old acquaintances where they could feel at home. Teresa did her best to fit in, developed tender feelings of admiration towards Mary Shelley, though she never saw her ‘rival’ Claire, disagreed furiously with Lady Blessington’s memories of Byron. She always had more English than Italian friends even after Byron’s death, which left her,

¹³² Gordon p. 166.

at the age of twenty-four, alone, neither widow nor wife – avoided by the convention and made much of by those who had a curiosity about Byron’s mistress. Maybe that is why she felt more at ease with English people.

Eight years after her lover’s death, she visited England for the first time in 1832, where she had an intimate talk with Augusta and became reconciled with her former rival Lady Blessington, of whom she had written:

She has put into his mouth a great many of her poor opinions of England, so that the blame may fall on him – and then she has taken on for herself the pose of an apologist of England, in order to gain the good graces of high society... She did all she could to seduce his mind (at least) but Lord Byron was aware of the trick.

There certainly is some truth in these words. Lady Blessington was very eager to get approval from English high society and could easily attain it by putting Byron in a bad light, as the seducer and critic of customs. However Teresa’s jealousy made her an impartial judge, as she had to admit later on when she developed a tender friendship with Marguerite and was introduced to London’s salons by her. Thus Byron’s Italian and English worlds met and the tangle of his affairs became even more complex. His English mistresses knew each other, were friends like Caroline and Lady Oxford, or even relatives like Annabella and Caroline, competed against one another on a literary level as Lady Blessington and Claire did, or for the poet’s heart, as Teresa and Lady Blessington did, and were acquainted with his immortal and immoral love Augusta. Would some of them ever have met if not for Byron? Did he influence their life more than they did his? Once again the distinction between predator and prey is hard to make, since mostly his women were both. Teresa, his last and longest love, for instance, was defined as a typical example of Byron’s mistresses: *Attachante et attachée*.¹³³

¹³³ Origo p. 470.

5. Byron's life and women in *Don Juan* – the 'truth in masquerade'

5.1. A comedy, mock-heroic epic and moral autobiographic poem

The theme of predatory women recurs again predominantly in Byron's most famous poem about men and women and the complicated entanglements of love in society - *Don Juan*.

It is very hard to give a precise definition of what kind of work it is. Maybe John Wilson Croker made a hit in stating that the long poem has so many different facets and meanings because of its creator's immense versatility.

Lord Byron's wonderful fertility of thought and facility of expression; and the Protean style of "Don Juan," instead of checking (as the fetters of rhythm generally do) his natural activity, not only gives him wider limits to range in, but even generates a more roving disposition. I dare swear, if the truth were known, that his digressions and repetitions generate one another, and that the happy jingle of some of his comical rhymes has led him on to episodes of which he never originally thought.¹³⁴

Indeed, the seventeen cantos present elements of different genres, cunningly combined to create an extraordinary hybrid, which expressed Byron's late fecundity at its best, in the 'most spirited, most straightforward, the most interesting, the most poetical' way he had ever written before, as John Lockhart told him in 1821, though few contemporaries shared his opinion.

If *Childe Harold* was a tragedy, voicing what W.H. Auden called the 'Byronic Byron', *Don Juan* is a comedy, where we find the 'Ironic Byron'¹³⁵. The poet himself knew this internal dichotomy and used it to write the counterpart to his earlier unfinished masterpiece, expecting this would remain open as well. However, it is not only from the conclusion that we can define if a work is a comedy or a tragedy. Like so many comedies *Don Juan* is concerned with fundamental themes such as women, Nature and society, treated mostly with bitter irony behind which we can detect moral teachings. The narration is primarily intended to make readers giggle and reflect about the falsity of petty-mindedness in society.

According to Beatty's¹³⁶ Catholic vision, the original *Don Juan* story is nothing other than a fable of punishment, a pattern Byron spectacularly reversed by narrating Juan's fall from innocence, due to predatory women, inexperience and society. This interpretation is influenced by Beatty's own fervent religious beliefs, which Byron did not share, though he was interested in Catholicism, the religion Teresa called her own and which he had chosen for his daughter Allegra as the most suitable. Even his good friend Scott, a pious man himself, had made the hypothesis that as an old man, Byron might retreat upon the Catholic faith and distinguish himself by the

¹³⁴ John Wilson Croker to John Murray, March 26th, 1820; Samuel Smiles: *A Publisher and his Friends - Memoir of John Murray* (1891) 1:413-16.

¹³⁵ Taken from Gregory Dowling: *Masters of the Airy Manner: Auden and Byron*.

¹³⁶ Bernard Beatty: *Fiction's Limit and Eden's Door in Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, p. 22.

austerity of his penance. It never happened, Byron came to terms with his past in another way - by displaying his morality in an unsparing assault on 'cant', a contemporary term for complacent, shallow sentiment, tinged with the mantle of hypocrisy one has to wear to be accepted, especially with women. To Lady Blessington he explained why he detested it, saying 'that while people are looking after the shadow, they lose the substance of goodness; he says that the best mode left for conquering it, is to expose it to *ridicule*, the only *weapon*, added he, the English climate cannot rust.'¹³⁷

The poet used his own biographic experiences to give the fiction depth and realism, though the choice of the most piquant episodes of his famous love-life and of the intriguing adventures narrated in a dry sarcastic and *ridicule* tone, turned out to be a two-edged weapon – not only against cant but also against himself. His biggest mistake was to openly attack outstanding political and intellectual personalities of his days from a weaker position – that of exiled poet with dubious fame and bad reputation. Still he dared affront public opinion with such an explosive and caustic production, defiantly maintaining 'that it [*Don Juan*] is the most moral of poems; but if people won't discover the moral, that is their fault, not mine' (Letter to Murray, February 1st, 1819). Few people did indeed understand him and take his defence, amongst whom was again Croker:

As to the PRINCIPLES, all the world, and you, Mr. Murray, first of all, have done this poem great injustice. There are levities here and there, more than good taste approves, but nothing to make such a terrible rout about [...] I direct my observations against you and those whom you deferred to... why did you start at "Don Juan"? Why smuggle it into the world and, as it were, pronounce it illegitimate in its birth, and induce so many of the learned rabble, when they could find so little specific offence in it, to refer to its supposed original state as one of original sin? If instead of this you had touched the right string and in the right place, Lord Byron's own good taste and good nature would have revised and corrected some phrases in his poem which in reality disparage it more than its imputed looseness of principle; I mean some expressions of political and personal feelings which, I believe, he, in fact, never felt, and threw in wantonly and "*de gaiete de coeur*," and which he would have omitted, advisedly and "*de bonté de coeur*," if he had not been goaded by indiscreet, contradictory, and urgent criticisms, which, in some cases, were dark enough to be called calumnies. (John Wilson Croker to John Murray, March 26th, 1820).

Don Juan was not as successful at his time as other works because of a fundamental misunderstanding of what its aim was – not just to mock illustrious contemporary figures and famous acquaintances of the poet, but to show the aching void behind the masquerade of the British upper-class. After all the word hypocrisy comes from the Greek and means 'under the mask'; so what better way of criticizing a society under a mask than by masquerading his own truth and autobiography through fiction, thus unmasking the falsity of what we consider the truth? His interlocutors were consciously chosen to 'renew' an old acquaintance, knowing

¹³⁷ LBC p. 13.

perfectly well that they were more than happy he was far away and not eager at all to be told any kind of truth by the unpredictable poet:

My gentle countrymen, we will renew
Our old acquaintance, and at least I'll try
To tell you truths you will not take as true,
Because they are so. [...]
(*DJ X*, 84)

Jerome McGann defines his way of writing as presenting 'fictive conditions in terms of which the human world would be more clearly revealed and, being revealed, would be more susceptible to human judgement. In the end, Byron's "imagination" is not creative (in the Romantic sense), it is analytical and critical (in the philosophic sense)¹³⁸. This transcending of autobiography and literary models to achieve universal moral teachings makes *Don Juan* a real epic. Unfortunately the audience did not want to be unmasked let alone to be stripped of its façade in such a desecrating way as for example in Canto I, 64:

Happy the nations of the moral north,
Where all is virtue, and the winter season
Sends sin without a rag on shivering forth
('Twas snow that brought St Anthony to reason),
Where juries cast up what a wife is worth
By laying whate'er sum in mulct they please on
The lover, who must pay a handsome price,
Because it is a marketable vice.

If we go beyond the surface, *Don Juan* appears to be Byron's most adult work, inspired by the hard lesson he had learned - that not even he could flout conventions without impunity. Still, if he had to pay for his errors, he decided to do it in a spectacular and proud way. The universal themes it dealt with, led Byron to consider his Donny Johnny an epic, as he said himself, though of a peculiar kind:

If you must have an epic, there's *Don Juan* for you. I call that an epic: it is an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the Iliad was in Homer's. Love, religion, and politics form the argument, and are as much the cause of quarrels now as they were then... In the very first Canto you have a Helen. Then I shall make my modern Achilles for fighting. [...]
Someone has possessed the Guiccioli with a notion that my Don Juan and the Don Giovanni of the Opera are the same person; and to please her I have discontinued his history and adventures.'
Medwin p. 164.

What makes his epic modern and different from classic models is the way he handles the themes of ancient songs in his caustically autobiographical cantos. His irreverent tone was not unlike that of the ancient satire, but Byron managed to combine different genres, personal, historical and fictive facts, and a multicultural environment to criticize, mock and moralize on

¹³⁸ Jerome McGann: *Don Juan in Context*, p. 161.

contemporary as well as universal faults of humanity. Rather than a comedy which makes people laugh, his is 'a playful satire, with as little poetry as could be helped', with the only purpose 'to giggle and to make giggle' (Letter to Murray, August 12th, 1819) about the panoramic variety of human experience, the quality of passion, fallen men and the mixed nature of civilisation, as M.K. Joseph¹³⁹ sums up. A work containing in itself the whole of a culture's modes of thinking and acting, is generally defined an epic, according to Thornbury¹⁴⁰ – an impressive expression of a moment of collective life, which could be written only by a man who knew the manners of his own day, with a full appreciation of the eternal motives behind them.

The genesis of such a poem was not simple and influenced by the combination of various events in the course of six years. Trelawny recalls that Byron started this epic masterpiece of irony and love in 1818 helped by Shelley, who in Ravenna urged him 'to come out of the "wood of error" into the sun' - to write something new and cheerful. '*Don Juan*', Shelley said, 'is the result. The poetry is superior to *Childe Harold*, and the plan, or rather want of plan, gives power to his astonishing natural powers.'¹⁴¹ Indeed the 'notions on the subject of Juan' seemed to come spontaneously, without a fixed pattern apart from a great inspiration deriving from literature as well as real life, as will be seen. Still, Byron had some sort of plan in mind, which followed the example of the great epics of the past:

My poem's epic and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books, each book containing,
With love and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships and captains and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three.
A panoramic view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and Homer,
So that my name of epic's no misnomer.
(*DJ* I, 200)

It was no misnomer, but his epic is certainly not strictly according to the models as he claims it to be. Leslie Marchand suggests that 'a sympathetic reader who has accepted the formless form of *Don Juan* will see this tendency only as another evidence of the conversational exuberance of the author and part of the revelation of a total personality which constitutes its charm.'¹⁴² Moreover, apart from a slice of the life and the mind and personality of an unusually vibrant,

¹³⁹ *Byron the Poet* p. 200.

¹⁴⁰ Thornbury, Ethel (1931) *Henry Fielding's Theory of the Comic Prose Epic*. Madison, Wisconsin. p. 134

¹⁴¹ *Trelawny* p. 52.

¹⁴² Marchand: *Byron's Poetry*, p. 199.

witty, and honest human being, it could also be judged as a 'novel-satire in verse rather than a poem in the ordinary sense'¹⁴³, he argues.

The success and scandal were immediate, to the point that in 1821 Byron had to promise Teresa to abandon the project of *Don Juan* after she had read the first Cantos in a French translation and was shocked by their irreverent and immoral content as well as the contempt for feelings such as female love. He willingly granted her this wish typical of women; 'the truth is that *it is TOO TRUE*, and women hate every thing which strips off the tinsel of *Sentiment...*' (Letter to Murray, October 12th, 1820) - they want to exalt this sentiment of passion and keep up the illusion, while his poem 'stripped off this illusion and laughed at that and most other things' (Letter to Murray, July 6th, 1821). Laughing and mocking tones are predominant in the adventures of this non-romantic protagonist who retraces his creator's youthful experiences of travel, introduction into high society and intense love-affairs, for once not the mythically heroic Byronic Byron like Harold, but rather the Ironic Byron, as in his early satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. His audience seemed to have forgotten this provoking side of Byron and with *Don Juan* it re-emerged most decidedly.

5.2. Venice – Muse and Mask

As Leslie Marchand argues, it was not a coincidence that Venice made Byron feel free for the first time 'to give vent to the full gamut of his nature and to every facet of his mind'¹⁴⁴ in a completely different way from what he had felt about the city in *Childe Harold*. The poignantly satirical tone of his previous works was seldom coined for the mere sake of laughter; it expressed bitter truths with a sad smile. In *Don Juan* in particular, it was 'based on a deeply felt recognition of the absurdities and self-deceptions of human conduct.' Hardly any aspect of English, Mediterranean or Oriental behaviour, male and female, escaped his fun-loving and cynical realism. P. W. Graham points out that for example both Eastern and Western forms of marriage were found wanting. The solution seems to be the Venetian standard, where human desire for change and the need for decorum were accommodated in a practical way. Probably the poet intended in due time to bring Juan to Italy, for he had much prime material to furnish adventures there. In the meantime he brought in some spicy details concerning the theatrical characters he had known in Venice, where he had been in the midst of intrigues with some singers and *figuranti* not long before writing the IV canto. Yet it should not be thought Venice

¹⁴³ Marchand: *Byron's Poetry* p.234.

¹⁴⁴ *Byron e la cultura veneziana* p. 54.

would have made Juan more immoral than other places; what Byron enjoyed of the city was more than the decadent society considered 'the seat of all dissolution' by the English moralist. McGann underlines how the exiled poet saw more than that:

He uses it as an extension of his own consciousness, like England. Byron stands between the two worlds and takes the best of each: from England, moral earnestness and a sense of reality, from Italy beauty, sensuality, and a sense of innocence.¹⁴⁵

Venice was his muse – she made him see England with different eyes and provided all the ingredients he needed for his new oeuvre as 'she joins earth, sky, and sea, East and West. She unites a noble republican past with a frivolous, oppressed present, piety with sensuality, beauty with decay.'¹⁴⁶ There he could be himself and finally write a poem which shows fundamental traits of his personality, left in the background until then. 'Those who know me most intimately can tell you that I am if anything too *childish*, with a greater turn for the ridiculous than for anything serious, - and, I could hope, not very ill natured *off the stage*, and if angry, never loud' (Letter to Annabella, October 20th 1814). The ridiculous, the idea of different behaviours on and off stage, his childish aspects are what he considered most intimately his and that is why they are predominant in *Don Juan*. In particular he enjoyed the 'Carnival balls – and masquerades – when everybody runs mad for six weeks', a thing uncommon in England and therefore difficult to understand: 'it is not in a humour which you would enter into – ye of the North' he told Murray in a letter on February 21st, 1820. Masquerades were not unknown in his home-country, though by the end of 1790 they had abruptly been eclipsed, as Terry Castle points out in *Masquerade and Civilization*. It was just a different kind of amusement no longer fit for the Regency period. Still an etiolated imagery persisted, she says, in common figurative speech, as a metaphor for deception as in Byron, but the institution was dead. A pity, since in this exuberant and unfamiliar atmosphere the poet felt at home immediately, liberated into what seemed to him the richness of life, typified by the liberation of the carnival, which he called 'drama without fiction.'¹⁴⁷ The restraints he felt free from were moral, social and intellectual. In *Byron – A poet before his public*, Philip Martin suggests that for the first time his social life was not directed by his literary reputation. The Italians recognized his rank and residence, whereas in London his being accepted into the high circles was the result of 'his appeasing the tastes of the upper-middle class, and his exile the result of their moral righteousness.'¹⁴⁸ He was finally able to assert a new-found independence in his daily conduct and this freedom manifested itself most

¹⁴⁵ Jerome McGann: *Fiery Dust* p.298- 299.

¹⁴⁶ *Byron e la cultura veneziana*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁷ February 6th 1823, *Letters and Journals*, IV, p. 440, found in Jump p. 38.

¹⁴⁸ Philip Martin: *Byron – a poet before his public*, p. 181.

obviously in his relationships with women and his works. Byron acted like a 'privileged gentleman who was directly accountable to no one'¹⁴⁹, neither his acquaintances nor his public.

Marchand asserts that this almost boundless freedom of expression derived from another kind of "posthumous" feeling Byron had in Venice, as if, once separated from English society, he were a voice from beyond the grave, superior to any censure or scandal. This may be partly true; although he never forgot the audience he was writing for and was quite concerned about his fame as a poet and their possibly not being able to understand the message of his poem. Right from the beginning, as he told his publisher in 1818, he wanted to 'be a little quietly facetious upon everything'¹⁵⁰ but he doubted whether it were not too free for his modest public, who would tolerate libertinism only if sentimental. Although he clung to that, it was still a scandalous oeuvre even for a rascal like him and he decided to interrupt it not only to please Teresa. However, *Don Juan* was still in his head and he thought about the sequel he would write a year later, with Teresa's leave. He wrote to Murray: 'I obtained a permission from my Dictatress to continue it, - *provided always* it was to be more guarded and decorous and sentimental in the continuation than in the commencement. How far these conditions have been fulfilled may be seen, perhaps, by the bye..' (Letter of July 8th, 1822). At the time of the Conversations with Medwin, he had a fairly precise plan, in spite of what Shelley thought, which was as follows:

I left him in the seraglio. There I shall make one of the favourites, a Sultana, fall in love with him, and carry him off from Constantinople. Such elopements are not uncommon, nor unnatural either, though it would shock the ladies to say they are ever to blame. Well, they make good their escape to Russia; where, if Juan's passion cools, and I don't know what to do with the lady, I shall make her die of the plague. [...] As our hero can't do without a mistress, he shall next become man-mistress to Catherine the Great. *Medwin* p. 165.

Indeed he took up the story in much the same spirit in which he had left it, showing that he would not give up. He remained faithful to his beliefs – Juan would either fail entirely or succeed completely. 'Come what may, I never will flatter the million's canting in any shape: circumstances may or may not have placed me at times in a situation to lead the public opinion, but the public opinion never led, nor ever shall lead, me' (Letter to Murray, August 1st, 1819).

¹⁴⁹ Martin p. 183.

¹⁵⁰ Quennell: *Byron in Italy*, p. 132.

The charge made against Caroline Lamb, of living constantly in a drama of which she was the heroine, could also be moved against Byron. From his youth, success had transformed him into something he would not have been if *Childe Harold* had not been published or had come out later. He was over-conscious of what the audience wanted to see and expected of him, he had to play up to the role of Byronic hero for the whole of his life and enjoyed it most of the time. It was hard work, however.

Even from abroad he kept the gossip in London going, by sending long and detailed letters to influential figures like Murray, knowing exactly he would read them out loud in his salon and foster the adventurous and scandalous atmosphere around the poet. He was conscious that his private and confidential letters, which shocked and delighted through their Regency *machismo*, were better known than any of his published works, as he told Trelawny. To Kinnaird, for example, he boastfully wrote: 'If they open our letters at the post, they will be edified by the correspondence – it is all hitherto about whores and rogues' (May 15th 1819). P. W. Graham calls this his 'epistolary masquerade', a sort of written form of the beloved Venetian pastime strongly present not only in the poet's life but also in his work. Byron enjoyed dressing up to annoy or please the correspondent, putting on the mask of man-of-the-world amused by exotic etiquette. Behind it there is a thorough Englishman suited for the stage, alternating highly dramatic and facetiously comic scenes, savouring the joys and pains of life completely and drawing inspiration for his scandalous poem from the depraved city he was writing in and which was influencing him more deeply than he realized. As W.H. Auden¹⁵¹ pointed out, his poetry was 'authentic' for the first time, due to the fact that he was starting to compose verses in the same natural way he wrote letters to his male friends. The Italian form of the *ottava rima* made it possible to transfer the tone of his letters to his poetry; we find the same witty and mocking narration with a kernel of utterly serious truth between the lines, as can be detected also in the following excerpt from a letter to his friend Kinnaird, where the use of Byron's boasting 'epistolary masquerade' can be clearly recognized:

As to "Don Juan" — confess — confess — you dog and be candid that it is the sublime of that there sort of writing — it may be bawdy — but is it not good English? It may be profligate — but is it not life, is it not the thing? — Could any man have written it — who has not lived in the world? — and tooled in a post-chaise? in a hackney coach? in a gondola? against a wall? in a court carriage? in a vis a vis? — on a table? — and under it? I have written about a hundred stanzas of a third Canto — but it is a damned modest — the outcry has frightened me. I have such projects for the Don — but the Cant is so much stronger than the Cunt — now a days, — that the benefit of experience in a man who had well weighed the worth of both monosyllables — must be lost to despairing posterity. (Letter to Kinnaird, Venice, October 26th, 1819).

¹⁵¹ W.H. Auden: *Don Juan* in *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 401.

Behind the dissolute seducer and insecure, criticized writer, we detect the proud author conscious of the worth of his misunderstood work. Jump asserts that his detachment was mistaken for indifference, cynicism or even cruelty.¹⁵² But it was quite the contrary; *Don Juan* itself shows the poet was far from aloof - eroticism, drinking from life's cup to the drain and disillusionment are the elements which led Byron to masquerading in Venice and inspired his poem, to the point that fiction and reality become one. In this he is exactly like his protagonist, Juan, who for this reason could not be mistaken for the Spanish Don Juan or the Italian Don Giovanni of the literary tradition. He is rather the hero of a pantomime or an Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, so famous in those days. The theme of the fooled cuckold husband (Don Alonso) or the gender reversal (Juan dressed as girl to enter the harem) recall particular conventions of these genres as well as Casanova's memoirs. Both protagonist – Juan is 'masked' at various stages by Julia's bedclothes, by female clothes as Juanna, by Haidée and from her father - and narrator relish in masquerading and having a mobile cosmopolitan identity, although the poem curiously ends with an unmasking – that of the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke dressed as a monk. The playful inversion of sexual roles was more or less tolerated in men as well as in women as the masquerades of the period, when men dressed as women and women as men, show. Caroline Lamb, for instance, was famous for her page costumes, which combined with her short hair and slim figure nearly deceived even Byron.

Andrew Elfenbein¹⁵³ argues that although gender roles are a product of civilisation, by employing literal and figurative cross-dressing in *Don Juan*, the poet does not want to suggest the androgyny of human nature but to puncture the ridiculousness of women and men who attempt to take on the traits characteristic of the opposite sex. Rather than a social critique, this sort of dressing-up is merely comic and allusive, just like a Carnival ball. And that is no accident, since Geoffrey Ward¹⁵⁴ asserts that possibly the main reason for Byron's increasing use of the imaginary of masquerade can be traced precisely to his having lived in Venice, becoming so familiar with the plays by Goldoni and the aforesaid *Commedia dell'Arte* that their implied philosophy and Venetian culture in general became part of his habitual ways of thinking. He said himself he started to feel like the 'Improvvisatore' (*DJ XV, 20*), on the model of the tradition of the Serenissima, adding very theatrical and unexpected scenes to his eclectic poem. Once again it appears clear how deeply Venice influenced *Don Juan's* creation.

¹⁵² M.K. Joseph: *Byron the Poet*, p. 323.

¹⁵³ Andrew Elfenbein: *Byron and the Victorians*, p. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Geoffrey Ward: *Byron's Artistry in Deep and Layered Space in Byron and the Limits of Fiction* p. 222-3.

5.3. Truth and Fiction

How far does this love for masquerades go in the perception of people around him? Of his English lovers we have many first and second-hand accounts, which give us a more complete picture of their personality and relationship with the poet. Of the Italians we have only his description, often sounding like a novel more than reality. How likely is it that he always found himself entangled in such peculiar situations with beautiful and desperately passionate women, who more or less followed the scheme of being 'very young – very romantic – and odd' and 'go[ing] crazy and mak[ing] scenes'? It appeared odd even to him that all his fairs were 'such romantic people; and always daggering or divorcing – or making scenes' (Letter to Augusta, October 5th, 1821) as if they were playing a precise role. Were *all* of his experiences truthful or just claims to fame? His prowess at sports or drinking, which he was as proud of as he was of his success with women, were pitied and contradicted by witnesses such as Trelawny or Lady Blessington, who had seen behind his mask. The latter in particular had the 'rare gift of understanding the complex characters of clever men, being able to distinguish between his genuine feelings and his self-protective readiness to sneer, to wound and to shock.'¹⁵⁵ Even for them it was sometimes hard to distinguish whether his stories were true or not. Indeed for most of the people who did not know him intimately, the description of Ali Pacha the poet gave, could as well fit himself: 'He had the appearance of anything but his real character' (Letter to his mother, November 12th 1809).

J.H. Browne, for instance, who sailed to Greece with Byron, was quite puzzled but could not completely believe the talkative poet:

Although occasionally affecting mystery, he yet could conceal nothing. This sometimes produced rather painful confidences, relative to his own family matters, and amatory intrigues, which, if they ever actually took place, he would have shown more good sense not to reveal; [...] this *façon the parler* consisted in a desire on his part, or rather weakness, if I may be permitted to term it so, to be considered amongst others as *roué*, and a man of gallantry;¹⁵⁶

Sir Walter Scott had his doubts too about how genuine his friend was, as he remembered in his journal on November 23rd, 1825, ten years after meeting him:

Byron was disposed to think all men of imagination were addicted to mix fiction or poetry with their prose. [...] I believe he embellished his own amours considerably and that he was in many respects *Le fanfaron des vices qu'il n'avait pas*.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Taken from Michael Sadleir found in Massie p. 174.

¹⁵⁶ 'Voyage from Leghorn to Cephalonia with Lord Byron, and a Narrative of a Visit, in 1823, to the Seat of War in Greece', *Blackwood's Magazine*, XXXV (Jan 1834), found in Page, *Byron – Interviews and Recollections* p. 131.

¹⁵⁷ *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W.F.K. Anderson (1972) Clarendon Press, Oxford p. 8, found in Page, *Byron – Interviews and Recollections* p. 36.

It is impossible to say who Byron really was, as he delighted all his life to give false or contrasting accounts of his adventures and to boast about vices he did not possess, as Scott said. At the same time, he was also creating characters around him: it appears that he chose his acquaintances and behaviours consciously, as if he was directing a character in a book. This was the case with men as well as women, as Trelawny underlined, and made him so inconstant in most of his attachments, always looking for something new and according to his wishes. The poet shared his friend's feeling that 'when well-known neither men nor women realise our first conception of them, so we transfer our hopes to the new men or women who make sign of sympathy, only to find them like those who have gone before, or worse.'¹⁵⁸ In this search for satisfactory relationships, all the people he met came to play some role in his story - he made them into characters as well, to be later used in his works or forgotten. Especially his female entourage was a constant source of inspiration, as can be clearly seen in *Don Juan*, a work of his maturity, when he was growing weary of his alter-ego, although by that time even he could hardly distinguish where it started and he ended. Trelawny understood this ambiguity behind the Byronic myth – it worked for the poet but also limited him.

On the one hand, Byron was afraid of showing his real face, because it might have damaged the myth. 'I am sure (said Byron [to Lady Blessington]) we can never justly appreciate the works of those with whom we have lived on familiar terms. I have felt this myself, and it applies to poets more than all other writers. They should live in solitude [...] never eating in company, and be as distinct in their general habits, as in their genius, from the common herd of mankind.'¹⁵⁹ These were the precepts he tried to follow, in order to maintain the façade intact because he knew that: 'to know an author, personally, is too often but to destroy the illusion created by his works; if you withdraw the veil of your idol's sanctuary, and see him in his night-cap, you discover a querulous old crone, a sour pedant, a supercilious coxcomb, a servile tuft-hunter, a saucy snob, or, at best, an ordinary mortal.'¹⁶⁰ As a result of the poet's surrounding part of his life in secrecy while displaying a heroic and superhuman personality, readers were (and still are) easily led to compare fiction and biography of an author, trying to detect autobiographical elements even where they were just vaguely inspiring. In the case of Byron, whose life was well-known and gossiped about, this comparison was made more readily, giving way to expectations - impossible to satisfy by a normal human being - in those who met him. This mistake was common already during the poet's life and annoyed him exceedingly – 'I never "mistook my person", though I think others have' (Journal, March 10th, 1814). He was *not* Childe Harold, nor any other

¹⁵⁸ Trelawny p. 58.

¹⁵⁹ LBC p. 109.

¹⁶⁰ Trelawny p. 40-41.

‘misanthropical gentleman, in wolf-skin breeches, and answering in fierce monosyllables, instead of a man of this world’ (Letter to Moore, July 5th, 1821). The tone of the last remark is playful but this identification with his works was frustrating at times, as the following outburst of the same letter shows:

I can never get people to understand that poetry is an expression of the *excited passion*, and that there is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides, who would ever *shave* themselves in such a state?

It seems clear that he enjoyed his excessive fame and complained about something he could not live without, despite the inconveniences it caused to be constantly expected to act according to people’s expectations of him. He had to accept that his attempts to set the picture right were vain, since he was opposed by his ‘moral Clytemnestra’ Annabella, who kept public opinion against him. With *Don Juan* he tried to make the audience see that he was not ‘even now, the misanthropical and gloomy gentleman [...] but a facetious companion, well to do with those with whom I am intimate, and as loquacious and laughing as if I were a much cleverer fellow.’ Unfortunately only few intimates knew the man behind his fame, for the rest he was right to suppose that ‘I shall never be able to shake off my sables’ (Letter to Moore, March 10th, 1817).

On the other hand, he was so accustomed to mingling truth and fiction, that he had as high expectation of others, as they had of him. Byron’s approach to the world through literature is elsewhere illustrated by Trelawny: he ‘formed his opinion of the inhabitants of this planet from books; personally he knew as little about them as if he belonged to some other. From reading Rochefoucauld, Macchiavelli, and other soured cynics, he learnt to distrust people in general; so, as he could do nothing without them and did not know how to manage them, he was always complaining of being over-reached, and never getting what he wanted. I don’t think he ever knew what he did want: few there are that do.’¹⁶¹

This is why it is of extreme importance to consider both his biography and literary background to understand his poetry fully, since experience, as has been said, came to him from books as well as from life. He insisted on the fact that his story was not wholly facetious, quite the reverse, there was a great deal of truth in his fiction, since, as he wrote to Murray, ‘I hate things *all fiction*.. There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar’ (Venice, April 2nd, 1817). When he said ‘There’s only one slight difference between / Me and my epic brethren gone before [...] this story’s actually true’, he meant the truth of motivation, of events, feelings and characters rather than the ‘clap-trap’ of situation and probability.

¹⁶¹ Trelawny p. 139.

He added

If any person doubt it, I appeal
To history, tradition, and to facts,
To newspapers, whose truth all know and feel,
To plays in five, and operas in three acts.
(*DJ* I, 203)

And it is this kind of truth, useful to the poet 'for getting at and clarifying what is true'¹⁶², that made his poem real but also disturbing. 'Such is Truth! Men dare not look her in the face, except by degrees: they mistake her for a Gorgon, instead of knowing her to be a Minerva' (Letter to author Isaac D'Israeli, June 10th, 1822). Byron challenged his audience by expressing truths it was not comfortable with and laughing at their miseries, but he could write effectively no other way. In fact he told Lady Blessington 'I always write best when truth inspires me, and my satires, which are founded on truth, have more spirit than all my other productions, for they were written *con amore*.'¹⁶³ That is due to the fact that they contain also a certain degree of self-revelation and of speaking his own thoughts to such a degree that reality was always breaking in throughout the poem. Marchand argues that he was 'constantly dancing back and forth from fiction to reality and was always on the brink of revealing something personal. For others it might be difficult to tell the bare truth; for him it was impossible to avoid it.'¹⁶⁴

The poet freely acknowledged that his love for truth and his ideas came to him as much from his reading as from his own observations, which he had collected over the years since 'anything that confirms, or extends one's observations on life and character, delights me' (Letter to Lady Melbourne, October 1st, 1813). Like all poets, he selected those with wide appeal, objectifying and generalizing them to pass from particular to universal. In this sense behind all his satirical irony, the attentive reader can detect moral teachings from a surprisingly earnest Byron, who wants to share what he has learned from his own adventures and misadventures. After all he underlined his connection with reality, meaning past events and people integrated in his poem, himself: '[there] was not a *single circumstance* of it *not* taken from *fact*; not indeed, from any *single* shipwreck, but all from *actual* facts of different wrecks. Almost all of *Don Juan* is *real* life – either my own or from people I knew' (Letter to Murray, August 23rd, 1821). That was his way of working and he laughed at the charges made against him of plagiarism and distortion of the truth since 'no writer ever borrowed less, or made his materials more his own' (Letter to Murray, August 23rd, 1821). There was no need to invent given that 'truth is always strange, / Stranger than fiction' (*DJ* XIV, 101).

¹⁶² McGann: *Don Juan in Context*, p. 163.

¹⁶³ *LBC* p. 266-7.

¹⁶⁴ *Byron's Poetry* p. 227.

For that reason, E. French Boyd affirms that the main theme of *Don Juan* could be pinned down to 'Truth and Feigning', or 'Reality and Appearance'. The purity of nature against the depravity of civilization; how things seem and what they are, and of course all the possible ways of love are what the poet deals with, aided by his accurate reading of the world - especially the female one. His friend Moore suggested that Byron's feminine traits of mind helped him in his prolonged and deep first- and second-hand study of women, the passions between the sexes and the effect of pure, selfish, hypocritical, love inside or outside marriage, upon the lives of women and the careers of men. Taking up a letter to Kinnaird again, is *Don Juan* 'not life, is it not the thing?'

5.4. A "new" Don Juan

Ever since Homer and Virgil, the summa of a poet's career was conventionally what Byron called 'a great work, an Epic poem I suppose or some such pyramid'; but he retorted 'I'll try no such thing - I hate tasks' (Letter to Murray, January 25th, 1819). *Don Juan* is certainly the summa of the poet's life, reflecting its extravagance in narration and style. Just as Byron always stood out, his work is immediately recognizable as epic cultural critique with autobiographical elements mapped on the hero's errant adventures. He abhors the 'usual method' of plunging *in medias res* and 'begin[s] with the beginning' (*DJ* I, 6-7). This beginning of the epic does not follow the traditional pattern of invocation to the muses. He simply states the need for a hero fit for his time and finds no better than the well-known seducer Don Juan:

I want a hero, an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt;
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan.
We all have seen him in the pantomime
Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time.
(*DJ* I, 1)

'In contrast to his legendary namesake, Byron's Juan is no rakish pursuer of women, but will still have his life run by women: his mother, his lovers, a Sultana and a Czarina, a Lady, and then a designing Duchess of the English 'Gynocracy' (so Byron spells it), and always by Fate (the metaphysical woman). New-one Juan is genial, good-hearted, perpetually innocent, and for ever young. He has almost no memory, no interiority, no soliloquies'¹⁶⁵ - they are all left to the narrator. Indeed, as W. H. Auden states in his essay contained in *The Dyer's Hand*, the official

¹⁶⁵ Susan J. Wolfson & Peter J. Manning: Introduction to *Don Juan* by Lord Byron, Penguin Classics.

hero is the least interesting figure in *Don Juan*, mostly because he does not fulfil the expectations tied to that name in the collective imaginary. Unlike the myth, he is not promiscuous by will, a seducer consciously renouncing to love or a defiant atheist. Byron's Juan is rather a sinner out of weakness and most importantly, he is human and not a monster. In this sense, following Auden's line of argument, the poem could be seen as a defence of the famous seducer but also of Byron himself, since he was believed to be a heartless libertine by many. Showing how easily a good-natured youth can slip into the unwanted role of philanderer blinded by success, predatory women and falsity, the responsibility of his actions is taken from him and others are to blame for what he has become. It is a sort of daydream of what Byron would have liked to be himself: pure, effortlessly beautiful, perfectly at ease in every circumstance, but as hard as he tried, reality cannot be moralized as easily as fiction. The great moral behind the whole oeuvre warns against the danger for passive, gentle youths of losing their purity and innate goodness because of society, which wrecks nobility and degrades noble impulses. Society makes Juan a libertine monster worthy of Hell. It could be said that Byron reflected in the protagonist his own situation of life when he was younger, or at least how he perceived it. Corruption, temptation and punishment come from the sins connected to predatory women: 'All because a lady fell in love' (*DJ* IV, 51) is the origin of all misadventures. In fact, while writing the poem, Byron had 'not quite fixed whether to make him end in Hell, or in unhappy marriage, not knowing which would be the severest. The Spanish tradition says Hell; but it is probably only an Allegory of the other state' (Letter to Murray, February 16th, 1821).

It is once more Byron's very personal issue of predator and prey, treated with irony but bitterly serious at bottom, which changes the legend of *Don Juan* to his own purposes – mainly to launch attacks against falsity and feel sympathy with the female heart he appears to abuse. His poem does not celebrate a libertine hero, according to Martin. The poet's description of his protagonist seems to confirm this statement:

But Juan was quite 'a broth of a boy',
A thing of impulse and a child of song
Now swimming in the sentiment of joy,
Or the sensation (if that phrase seem wrong)
[...]

But always without malice; if he warred
Or loved, it was with what we call 'the best
Intentions' [...]
(*DJ* VIII, 24-25)

Byron maintains his equanimity and restraint throughout his work, constantly denying 'the demands and expectations of the contemporary reader. It did not give them what they really wanted to disapprove of (hence the poem's misrepresentation) any more than it provided them with what was dictated by contemporary tastes.'¹⁶⁶ His Juan is a naive, impulsive and good-hearted boy, seeking resting places with women rather than escaping after having seduced them. His will is subjected to theirs and if circumstances did not perpetually drive him away from his beloved ones, he would probably lead a pretty monogamous life, at least for a few years, as Byron did. He simply never gets the chance to actively seduce a woman or to stay with her for long periods. Since the protagonist never imposes himself on others or on circumstances, his adventures turn out to be unpredictable and random, following no precise poetic plan. Few things are sure and fixed, the whole poem is ambiguous. Not only the protagonist but also the women are both predator and prey, the line cannot be clearly drawn and this modern move against the tradition of innocent seduced dolls towards psychologically convincing characters is decidedly 'new'. Since in style as well as in content 'the soul of such poetry is its license', Byron adapted the traditional material with unconventional freedom to his own view of human life.

In this work it is of less importance to list the earlier versions of *Don Juan* than to retrace the personal sources of inspiration Byron added to the literary ones. Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de Piedra* of the early seventeenth century is the prototype of Don Juan literature, continued by Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, Thomas Shadwell's pantomime *The Libertine*, Goldoni's comedy *Don Giovanni Tenorio, o sia Il Dissoluto*, based on Moliere's *Le Festin de Pierre*. He had most certainly seen or read these works and re-elaborated them in his own, peculiar manner – his Donny Johnny is rather seduced than seducing and not carried off to hell by a stone guest like the other Juans.

Byron is original in many different ways, for instance in style. As in *Beppo*, he uses the Italian *ottava rima* of Pulci, whose mock-heroic epic *Morgante Maggiore* he had started to translate into English. Leslie Marchand¹⁶⁷ suggests that after he had written several cantos and had begun to consider that poem an outlet not only of buffoonery and waggish wit but also for serious satire on modern society, he had the instinctive feeling that this was the style best suited to his talents, in which he could produce his most original contributions to literature at a time when he was quite giving up on literature altogether. Auden certainly shared this opinion. The potentiality of the strict form of eight hendecasyllabic lines rhyming following the scheme ABABABCC, lies precisely in its tight restrictions since being thought for the Italian language, in

¹⁶⁶ Martin p. 190.

¹⁶⁷ *Byron's Poetry – A Critical Introduction* p. 155.

which rhyming words are more easily found than in English, it stimulates what Auden calls the poet's 'comic imagination, leading to the discovery of comic rhymes and providing opportunities for the interpolated comment and the controversial aside'¹⁶⁸. These comments and asides are frequently to be found in the final epigrammatic couplet, in which the witty poet, master of the difficult feminine rhyme (another female he knew how to handle we might say) rejoiced in displaying his irony.

As far as content is regarded, all Byron was claiming was 'that freedom which Ariosto, Boiardo, and Voltaire – Pulci, Berni, all the best Italians and French – as well as Pope and Prior among the English – permitted themselves; but no improper words, nor phrases; merely some situations taken from life' (Letter to Hobhouse, November 11th, 1818). The poet expected his audience to recognize and relish not only his free imitation of his numerous models but also every least allusion to the world of letters or of European society. Society, however, did not care for these hints but was more concerned with the very different picture of the poet it had – not passive victim or prey but active mischief-maker - and was not ready to be presented in the bad and irreverent light as cause of corruption of the natural hero contrary to sin. Compared to the legend, the hero's role in Byron changes from heartless seducer to helpless prey of women. Juan inherits his creator's 'susceptibility and inability to say 'No''¹⁶⁹ as well as his damaged childhood – the real causes of all his wickedness.

Moreover, the scope is enlarged from mere amatory intrigue to war, politics, travel and society. The shift in some way is from the traditional Don Juan, similar to the Byron society saw, to the Byronic Juan, unlike earlier heroes of the poet's work but in some sense more like the way he saw himself – prey rather than predator. Indeed, Byron's fame of seducer was due more to his self-representation than to the real number of his lovers. As in Casanova's and Don Juan's case, the important thing was to boast rather than to actually seduce. When Byron claimed to have slept with more than two hundred women during his first two years in Venice, he somehow followed the example of Leporello's famous catalogue of 1003 seduced Spanish ladies in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, in number rather than in quality, as Anne Barton points out. By contrast, Juan has only five affairs in the course of the whole poem, and in none of them did he seduce the woman or experience a happy-ending. This is not unlike his creator, whose most important love-stories have been already presented and do not outnumber Juan's lovers by much. Nor do these relationships end in a much better way.

¹⁶⁸ Auden, p. 398.

¹⁶⁹ Anne Barton: *Byron – Don Juan*, p. 26.

5.5. Literary tradition VS autobiography – The journey of narrator and protagonist

The main themes of love, war and travel, as has been said, are not simply copied from other literary sources to create his *Don Juan*. Byron uses the traditional myth in a very personal way, adding numerous and maybe unconscious autobiographical details to the picaresque adventures of the protagonist. His Juan travels throughout Europe and the Levant, meeting women in every country, just as his creator did in his youth. The protagonist is accompanied first by his tutor Pedrillo and later by an English soldier of fortune, John Johnson, who both reflect aspects of the poet's most faithful friend and travel-companion, Hobhouse – *sang froid*, stoic patience, wit and loyalty. Indeed not only women find a place in his narrative, men and countries with their costumes and beliefs are as important as love – he tried to cover the whole essence of humanity. Unfortunately his untimely death prevented him from finishing his work according to the ambitious and complicated plans, formed after the publication of the fifth canto. Had he managed, it would have been such a mastodontic poem, he doubted it would be possible to bring it to an end.

I mean to take him the tour of Europe – with a proper mixture of siege – battle – and adventure – and to make him finish as Anacharsis Cloots – in the French revolution. – To how many cantos this may extend – I know not – nor whether (even if I live) I shall complete it – but this was my notion. – I meant to have him made a Cavalier Servente in Italy and a cause for a divorce in England – and a Sentimental 'Werther-faced man' in Germany – so as to show the different ridicules of the society in each of those countries - - and to have displayed him gradually *gaté* and *blasé* as he grew older – as is natural. (Letter to Murray, February 16th, 1821).

This quotation is crucial not only because it unfolds Byron's plans, but also to understand the importance of travel, biography and sources in the poem. From a structural point of view, travels enable the protagonist to explore 'the different ridicules of the society in each of those countries' but do not provide him with superior knowledge or useful experience. Instead they make him *gaté* and *blasé*, meaning spoilt, rotten and bored – changed for the worse. This change is natural in Byron's eyes, maybe because that was how he experienced his restless travelling, although it also gave him inspiration and material to write about.

The passage shows how Juan's planned adventures were all flagrantly Byronic, both in heroic and satiric mode. Firstly, the poet (like the character) took a Grand Tour of Europe, though one that was more Mediterranean and Eastern than usual, which explains why he started from these countries in *Don Juan*. Secondly, he was the *cavalier servente* of Teresa Guiccioli at the time of writing and even ceased writing it for some time at her request, hence from a point of view of content, it would have been delightful to read about Juan in Italy as a *cavalier servente*, since this country influenced Juan's creation so much. Thirdly, the Byronic heroes are similar to Goethe's Werther, and it would have been interesting to see his re-elaboration of the much

admired German model, though it might have been difficult to describe France and Germany without ever having travelled there. Apart from Russia, wholly unknown to the author, the countries traversed by the poem – Spain, Greece, Turkey and England – were places experienced ‘long ere I dreamt of dating from the Brenta’ (*DJ I*, 212). At least he had no problems describing how to be a cause of divorce given that his marriage in England had failed. Lastly, as the narrator of *Don Juan* he is just as *gaté* and *blasé* as he expects Juan to become after all the adventures he never came to embark on.

As can be seen, many aspects of Juan’s character and adventures are shaped on Byron’s own personality and life, and the figures he meets are more or less evident portraits of people he really knew. But it is not in Juan we find the real Byron, at least not the man he had become when he was writing this epic. Although the first two cantos of *Don Juan* were published anonymously, it did not take the English audience long to detect the author, apart from some critics, who thought it too gross even for him. Was it because nobody else would have written such a poem or because Byron was easily recognizable? In the early cantos the narrator is quite hidden, does not intervene too much and pretends to be a character as well, one who knew Juan’s family personally and recounts his story. In the introduction the author, a different person from the narrator, masterfully sets the scene, asking the reader to imagine the narrator to be

a Spanish gentleman in a village in the Sierra Morena on the road between Monasterio and Seville sitting at the door of a *posada* with the Curate of the hamlet on his right hand, a cigar in his mouth, a jug of Malaga or perhaps ‘right sherries’ before him on a small table, containing the relics of an *olla-podrida*. (*Preface to Cantos I and II*, 53-58).

‘The reader is further requested to suppose him (on account of his knowledge of English) either an Englishman settled in Spain, or a Spaniard who had travelled in England, perhaps one of the Liberals’ (*Preface*, 80-83), which as we said was one of the charges against Byron himself and allowed him to say scandalous things. Byron was well aware he was writing for an English audience and maintained a certain distance from the narration, commenting and intervening only occasionally to make short but extremely personal remarks. For instance the aside in brackets ‘(I’m very fond of handsome eyes)’ when describing Julia in Canto I, 60, or the tongue-in-cheek reflection ‘I’m fond myself of solitude or so, / But then I beg it may be understood; / By solitude I mean a sultan’s, not/ A hermit’s, with a harem for a grot’ (*DJ I*, 87), could be uttered by the fictional Spanish narrator but sound just too much like fun-loving Byron. These are only a few of numerous hidden hints at the identity between author and narrator – Byron emerges as Byron conducting us through his partly historical fiction. There are many other clearly

manifested apostrophes and autobiographical elements, which interrupt the flow of the action and leave the stage to the poet as himself.

The reader is not bothered by his asides and follows the story of Juan, although he cannot identify himself wholly either with the narrative or with the author-commentator. Before half of the first canto was written, however, Byron had abandoned the fiction and became author, narrator and commentator, intervening so actively that the mask of the Spanish narrator was completely forgotten. The commentator is still fictional, but more like Byron himself, whose irony in the later cantos becomes more and more pervasive, as it is based on direct experience. 'Whereas in the in earlier cantos the irony arises partly from the swiftness and variety of narrative, now the commentator fully comes into his own.'¹⁷⁰ After ten cantos of faraway places and hidden allusions to England and its inhabitants, who were implicitly criticized by the comparison with inhabitants of southern and eastern Europe, Byron is finally free to give way to his causticity in his own country, as he had planned from the beginning. In the first canto he expressed his intention that 'in canto twelfth I meant to show / The very place where wicked people go' (*DJ I*, 207). The feelings for Britain are too strong in the self-exiled poet, he drops the masks and his poignant digressions become longer and longer. In the English cantos not only the narrator, but also the characters become more complex and less like fixed masks. They are not as immediately recognizable as Inez/Annabella was, because their ingredients come from a lifetime of observations of different human traits rather than a caricature of a single one. The characters are composites or types rather than actual people; still we can detect some models he took inspiration from.

Bernard Beatty affirms that Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de Piedra* is a much less direct precedent for Byron than *The Odyssey*, even though Tirso's hero is also Byron's. Especially in the travel episodes, the references to Homer's epic are frequent and show how Juan is tossed around the Mediterranean as his creator was when he was young, and as the Greek warrior had been. During the disastrous shipwreck Juan loses all his companions like Odysseus when he is washed to the shore naked and exhausted. They both find a beautiful young woman to take care of them, Nausicaa/Haidée and to help them regain their strength. The episode of Lambro's return to the island to find his daughter and her lover feasting unaware of the danger, openly imitates the *Odyssey* as well – 'A honest gentleman at his return may not have the good fortune of Ulysses', is likely to find his Penelope unchaste and 'that his Argus bites him by – the breeches' (*DJ III*, 23). Of course the tone is always facetious but also self-assured in being able to re-elaborate a great classic so jocosely, adding autobiographical

¹⁷⁰ M.K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* p. 320.

references too, since Byron's beloved dog Boatswain once bit away the backside of his breeches, as he told Moore. Actually he reverses the model completely, because Juan is more anti-hero than hero¹⁷¹. Unlike Odysseus he is neither superior in cunning, skill or luck, nor a home-comer, who in no way threatens moral and social values centred in community, continuity and quiet. Maybe that is what makes him human, imperfection and a touch of personal experience of the author, combined with ironic use of literary models.

On the same track Byron reuses not only his geographical knowledge, but also the complex personal past upon which he meditates so obsessively. Literary and autobiographical material is interwoven, mostly using Byron's careful technique of supporting his first-hand experience of places and people with literary descriptions he had accumulated in the years of reading memoirs and travels. Another inter-textual and autobiographical combination can be found in Juan's adventures in Constantinople. In 1810 the poet landed there on his way from Smyrna and had an audience with the Sultan Mahmoud II during his two months' stay, though of course he never got access to his harem. This city had a particular fascination for many Western travellers, to the point that Orientalism became a fashion especially in the nineteenth century. Even before that it was the setting of various adventures between Christian and Muslim lovers or enemies. One example could be Mozart's opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, a love-story like those of the *Arabian Nights*. This does not imply that Byron took inspiration from Mozart's opera or even knew it. The reference just shows how wide-spread interest in the Ottoman Empire was at the time.

Casanova, the great libertine of the previous century, had also been in Constantinople in 1745 and nearly became a Muslim to marry a beautiful girl. Since he could not make up his mind to settle down, he resumed his travels throughout Europe and beyond. Another point in common between Juan and the famous Venetian libertine is the fact that both meet Catherine the Great, one in fiction, one in truth. Although Byron probably never read the *Memoirs* of Casanova, there are some striking similarities, also in the way their journeys underscore the richness and diversity of Continental identity in the eighteenth century. Byron's knowledge of the Eastern habits and customs however was more thorough and more closely based on personal experience, than that of other writers, who simply grounded their works on certain commonplaces and prejudice. In Albania the poet had met the great sultan Ali Pasha, who rewarded the poet's glowing praise of him in *Childe Harold* with his friendship. Through this influential acquaintance Byron got to know the Oriental way of living well, as can be seen in his accurate description of the interior of the Sultan's palace and harem. Since he was writing, in

¹⁷¹ Beatty, p. 4.

the first instance, for an English audience which had already been pleased by his account of the East in *Childe Harold*, Byron kept up the theme though in a less serious way in order to avoid being once again mistaken for the hero of his narration. However he did not succeed completely in this.

Narrator and author are neither completely identical nor disjoined – the ‘real’ Byron reported by Medwin is much like the ‘fictional’ narrator, especially in the English cantos, though in some sense he is much more. Nonetheless, it is never Byron himself, it is all part of his having fun at playing roles and manipulating others, treating the reader to the fun by letting him watch it all, as McGann explains. Even if Byron in *propria persona* sometimes looks like a persona in his poems, the critic goes on, it is just a self-dramatized myth, for ‘although the details of his life have a historical basis, the meanings of these details is also, and simultaneously, moralized.’¹⁷²

The moralistic aim has already been analysed, but what are these details he gives? We can detect Byron not only in the figure of the narrator, but also in other characters such as Juan, Lambro, the poet on the Greek island and many more. He is simultaneously present in the poem and outside it, as the commentator or lending parts of his personality and experiences to others. Seen in this light, as M.K. Joseph¹⁷³ affirms, Byron was living out fully the personal meaning writing had for him: To withdraw himself from himself, as he annotated in his Journal. By separating narrator and hero he does so; actually there is no character, not even the commentator, who represents him as he really is; we are just allowed to see what he wants us to believe. And the same thing happens with his heroines.

¹⁷² McGann, *Fiery Dust* p. 287.

¹⁷³ *Byron the Poet* p. 151.

5.6. Literary tradition VS autobiography – The “weaker” sex

It is very interesting to see how in Byron’s mind, Juan was free to act, very often being the prey rather than the predator of the women he met, to the point that he became man-mistress. The use of this term indicates how the activity of extra-marital lover was limited to women, at least linguistically, since there is no male word for mistress. Juan’s position is peculiar, he is the object of desire of very self-willed, powerful ladies, not unlike Byron, who said: ‘I am true to Nature in making advances come from females.’ Moreover, there is truth to be found in his representation of females, who influence not only the content of his satirical work but also the mode of writing. Indeed it is from their sly behaviour he gets the idea to mingle truth and fiction:

Now what I love in women is, they won’t
Or can’t do otherwise than lie, but do it
So well, the very truth seems falsehood to it.
(DJ XI, 406)

The mature and disillusioned narrator/author chooses to reveal his real identity and thoughts sometimes through the narration and sometimes through direct interventions, leaving the reader in constant doubt whether he is telling the truth or lying, despite his numerous proclamations of sincerity:

Besides, my Muse by no means deals in fiction:
She gathers a repertory of facts,
Of course with some reserve and slight restriction,
(DJ XIV, 13)

His way of ‘lying’ is in the combination of past and present biographical facts in themselves, which contribute to moral teachings, and fiction, meaning all kinds of genres: ‘Apologue, fable, poesy and parable, / Are false, but may be render’d also true’ (DJ XV, 89). McGann¹⁷⁴ opens up a deeply philosophical digression on the impossibility of finding truth in an utterly false world rooted in the author in constant conflict with appearance and reality. Byron manages to solve this dichotomy through a reversed scepticism: ‘He who doubts all, nothing can deny’ (DJ XV, 88), he says, and adds that though all visionary realities are clearly ‘false’ by realistic standards, nevertheless they ‘may be rendered also true’ by an even more sceptical and realistic mind. And that is exactly what Byron does in *Don Juan*, so: ‘Praised be all liars and all lies!’ (DJ XI, 406) because they are actually true and not despicable lies, which he would never use in his poem. And since the best liars are women, it is on them he focuses.

In the course of the poem different aspects of female behaviour are represented by various characters - there are strong-headed, shy, clever, wicked, dominated and domineering beautiful

¹⁷⁴ McGann: *Fiery Dust*, p. 186.

women, forming an ample spectrum of heroines. Drawing from real life to form his fictional figures, the variety of his females is much wider than that of his heroes, who take after their sole model – Byron. It is fascinating to detect how much Byron’s women influenced his works and to find out which of Juan’s co-protagonists represent an allegory of traits taken from real ladies in the poet’s life. The infinite variety of female portraits we find in *Don Juan* illustrates not just mere objects of love but complete personalities exhibited at every age and stage of their careers; in a word the complex relationship between men and women, seen from the unusual point of view of a reputed rake who felt himself the most pursued of men. McGann affirms that as counterparts of his male protagonists these heroines correspond each exactly to a precise state of mind of the hero’s soul which they inhabit, objectifying the passionate impulses in the man whose imagination made them what they are. Women are not at the centre of *Don Juan* or other works as themselves, but always correlated to the man as ‘untrue’ and allegorical. This was regarded probably not regarded as what we would call a grave sexist fault nowadays, but still it led to one of the major accusations against Byron’s poem: that it treated women harshly, to which he responded ‘it may be so, but I have been their martyr. My whole life has been sacrificed to them and by them’ (Letter to Murray December 10th, 1819). Leslie Marchand suggests that having become a lurid legend, a legend that had been partly built on the facts of his life and partly on what he had written, he was identified with the seducer Don Juan, while he actually felt more like the hidden, seduced Juan. The latter was his rational and ideal self, the one he could not always be in real life because his personality at bottom was not generally known to the world.

Byron’s complex and contradictory attitudes towards the opposite sex are all brought together in a single poem where they can be reconciled more easily.

He waged comic war against bluestockings and chilly women – and then married one. He claimed to be happiest with passionate ‘animals’ like the Fornarina, [...] remained perpetually blind to the inadequacies of his sister, the featherbrained Augusta, but also maintained close friendships with a series of highly intelligent and perceptive women. (Barton p. 25).

Contradictory they were indeed but, just so, more sensitively cognizant of the waste and futility of so many of their lives. This hidden sympathy is displayed also in the narrator’s exclamation to read between the lines: ‘Think not fair creatures, that I mean to abuse you all; / I have always liked you better than I state (*DJ XII*, 28). In *Byron e la cultura veneziana*, Barton notices that Byron’s handling of the women in the poem ‘from Julia to Lady Adeline in the English cantos – is remarkably sympathetic, indeed essentially feminist.’¹⁷⁵ Though his attitude was rather distrustful and derogatory towards women, he always underlined the importance of naturalness

¹⁷⁵ *Byron e la cultura veneziana*, p. 104.

in both sexes of desire and the unhappy consequences of society to stifle it, leaving marriage as the only acceptable outlet. These modern beliefs served to classify him as a scandalous libertine, but at heart they were just. And true, too true. 'But hear that several people take exception / At the first two books having too much truth; [...] Through needles' eyes it easier for the camel is / To pass, than those two cantos into families.' (*DJ IV*, 97).

The fact that his poem was largely misunderstood at the time, following Barton's line of argument, led the author to think his readership could not be female. He wrote *Don Juan* as well as *Childe Harold* with a male audience in mind, since they deal with common masculine experiences, such as the Grand Tour, politics or seduction, which women would not understand or be less interested in. Indeed he was right, his work found almost unanimous dislike in the ladies' eyes, uniting diverse personalities such as Lady Byron, Augusta Leigh, Caroline Lamb and Teresa Guiccioli. Even Lady Blessington made the poem a prohibited subject of conversation. Maybe it was because they recognized themselves in some lines and felt mocked and betrayed in front of a big audience, which would take up the biographical hints behind the fictional literary mask. It was of little help to surround the fictional characters with an exotic background or to set the events in faraway countries; it was clear to everyone that the contrast between north and south only made the faults of his countrymen and women more deeply felt. Especially female outrage about *Don Juan* reached the point that he wrote to Hoppner 'There has been an eleventh commandment to the women not to read it – and what is still more extraordinary they seem not to have broken it. But that can be of little import to them, poor things, for the reading or non-reading a book will never keep down a single petticoat' (October 29th, 1819). He was just hiding behind another mask, that of the insecure author, while he knew exactly why the English blue-stockings who were eagerly reading his scandalous poem disliked it: 'all works which refer to the *comedy* of the passions, and laugh at sentimentalism, of course are proscribed by the whole *sect*. [...] And I never met with a woman, English or foreign, who did not do as much [feel affronted] by D[on] J[uan]' (Letter to Hobhouse, July 6th, 1821).

Nonetheless, the poet said 'my *figures* are not portraits' (Letter to D'Israeli, March 15th, 1820). What then piqued the ladies ever more than his ridiculing their feelings? Obviously, even though there may not be a perfect correspondence between these women and the female characters, the resemblance could not be overlooked. Many critics, like M.K. Joseph, noticed that 'the wonderfully rich and diversified range of feminine character is based on Byron's own experience with almost every possible degree of approximation, from near-portrait to idealized type.'¹⁷⁶ From Annabella, his mother, and Lady Blessington, to Teresa, Caroline and Lady Oxford, they

¹⁷⁶ M.K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* p. 175.

have unmistakably all been models for the poem's heroines. Again we have the theme of the 'truth in masquerade' (*DJ XI*, 36) – the mask behind which the author hides and with which he transforms his acquaintances into characters. It was not for lack of inspiration he was turning the truth into fiction, but because through mocking and ironizing about men and women, he criticized the hypocritical society they were all part of. Women in particular, who appear to be rather predators of innocent Juan, are in fact prey to this system. Byron was not simply caricaturing them for the mere sake of laughter or personal revenge, there is too much insight into their passionate psychology and pity for their helpless situation to be so. As for their feelings – what they inflict they feel and even more what is inflicted on them:

Alas, the love of women! It is known
To be a lovely and fearful thing,
For all of theirs upon that die is thrown,
And if 'tis lost, life hath no more to bring
To them but mockeries of the past alone,
And their revenge is as the tyger's spring,
Deadly and quick and crushing; yet as real
Torture is theirs, what they inflict they feel.

They are right, for man, to man so oft unjust,
Is always so to women. One sole bound
Awaits them, treachery is all their trust.
Taught to conceal, their bursting hearts despond
Over their idol, till some wealthier lust
Buys them in marriage – and what rests beyond?
A thankless husband, next a faithless lover,
Then dressing, nursing, praying, and all's over.
(*DJ II*, 199-200)

The passage shows real sympathy for women, for once not heartless predators but prey – of their passionate feelings, which a chauvinist upbringing teaches them to conceal in order to sell them on the marriage market, uncaring for their wishes. And then there is not much joy left in their situation. 'Free as a married woman' ironically really says it all. How free were women? True, in 'Christian lands' they were 'seldom kept in garrison' (*DJ II*, 175) but did that make them free? The few liberties they could afford, were always regulated by the system, which in some cases shut its eyes in front of an adulterous wife, just to punish her afterwards. It did not mean that men were to blame, Byron realized, as both man and women were all prey to the dangerous game of love and power:

A woman (as society is constituted in England) who gives away any advantage to a man may expect a lover, but will sooner or later find a tyrant; and this is not the man's fault either, perhaps, but is the necessary and natural result of circumstances of society, which, in fact, tyrannise over the man equally with the woman' (Letter to Lady Hardy, November 10th, 1822).

Yet, despite the vaguely similar position they had in certain circumstances, the female sex was indeed the 'weaker' one at the time. We should not be fooled by the predatory and powerful *femmes fatales* the poet presents in his work, with all their faults and imperfections. In love, they are superior 'female hearts are such a genial soil / For kinder feelings, whatsoever their nation' (*DJ V*, 120) and for that reason more likely to suffer. Their freedom of sentiments is only apparent, apart from 'love platonical' and 'canonical' there was always a third way: 'when chaste Matrons to their other ties / Add what may be called *Marriage in Disguise*' (*DJ IX*, 76). However, very few ladies could keep these ties for long if they did not follow the rules of society and disguise in the right way. The institution of the *cavalier servente* was one way, or playing dumb like many complaisant husbands, but it never lasted. Most of Juan's mistresses end tragically, Julia in a convent, Haidée dead, Gulbeyaz prisoner in a golden cage, Catherine alone in her power, Adeline unable to follow her heart etc. The caustic tone is harsh at first sight, underneath there is more. It is true, as Elfenbein asserts, that Byron 'could not have been more patriarchal in his attitudes: he often treats women as wholly other, and sometimes as wholly contemptible. In his poetry, however, he inherited 'a language that purported to represent a subjectivity purified of gender traits'¹⁷⁷, going beyond the traditional separation between the sexes to discover a more universal sensibility common to both.

The relationship between truth and appearance is even more complicated than that. The first level is Byron living himself in a kind of fiction, the myth around him which he cannot shake off. Then the masquerade of hypocrisy and cant in society he tries to unmask in his poem, which is 'the most sincere that ever dealt in fiction' (*DJ XVI*, 2), is shown through the behaviour of a single man, Juan, confronted with numerous, different women. Here the interconnection reaches another stage, since the characters are all part of the theatre of the world, playing a precise role in the masquerade/disguise, sometimes trespassing even their gender with cross-dressing, and showing only partly what they really are. The other part, the one they want to hide, is cruelly uncovered by the commentator. Lastly, the continuous innuendos which 'decoy readers into pulling off the mask themselves, uncovering their own hypocrisies.'¹⁷⁸ This ability to mask and unmask reality is what really characterizes this work and makes it a masterpiece.

¹⁷⁷ Elfenbein p. 21-22.

¹⁷⁸ Barton p. 82.

5.7. Byron's translation of the women around him in Don Juan

The narrator of *Don Juan* may 'want a hero', as the incipit declares, but at heart the author of *Don Juan* wants a heroine, according to Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning. Who then could it be of the large entourage? Is there just one or are there many? Having analysed the lives and relationships of Byron's women, it would be natural to see whether they are reflected in his work. It is dangerous to undertake such an enterprise based on hypothesis more than certainties, but if it is true that he studied feminine character as if he were in a laboratory, using his extensive bookish knowledge rather as commentaries than as inspiration, then it should not be too difficult to detect where the women of his life served as negative or positive muses, clearly apostrophized in the text. Moreover, going beyond the merely fictive and autobiographical aspects of the poem, there are also numerous details of sociological and historical interest concerning the female situation in the early nineteenth century. From the poet's description of innumerable different conditions women could be in, many a piece of information about modes of thinking and everyday life of the time can be produced. To give one example, in one stanza the narrator lists all the activities that high-born ladies occupied in those days, giving the reader a more detailed picture of female occupations than can be found in other works of contemporary writers:

The ladies, some rouged, some a little pale,
Met the morns as they might. If fine, they rode
Or walked; if foul, they read or told a tale,
Sung, or rehearsed the last dance from abroad,
Discussed the fashion which might next prevail
And settled bonnets by the newest code,
Or crammed twelve sheets into one little letter,
To make each correspondent a new debtor.
(DJ XIII, 104)

Beatty¹⁷⁹ states that Byron, being an attentive observer of womanhood, often tends to separate moral characteristics out into different figures, in an ambitious attempt to write in almost allegorical fashion. It has already been pointed out that the first canto caused a scandal because of its objectionable allusions to Lady Byron in the figure of Donna Inez. Although Byron tried to discharge himself from these accusations, the parallel with the bluestocking mathematician was evident. He also took inspiration from his bad relationship with his doting mother to construct the character. In some way her strict and unsympathetic tutelage contributed to the hero's ignorance of the gross hypocrisy that dominates reality and all his consequent misadventures.

¹⁷⁹ Beatty: *Fiction's Limit and Eden's Door in Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, p. 23.

What about the other, less recognizable hints at real women of his life in the poem? Could Julia, Juan's first and unhappy love, have some aspects of the poet's irrevocably lost love Mary Chaworth, and his impossible love for Augusta - equally married, conscious of doing wrong and doomed to never meet him again? Moreover, the comic betrayal of her old husband recalls Byron's adventures with Teresa and the jealous Count Guiccioli closely. Does not pure, innocent Haidée reflect 'the libertine wish-dream of a perfect sense experience which remains itself while at the same time reaching out to incorporate a world of pure spirit – to a large extent bypassing language'?¹⁸⁰ The fact that she is a young, illiterate and superbly beautiful Greek girl reminds us of his admiration for the silent and untouchable Maid of Athens, with whom he may have wished to have a more physical affair, if there had been less control. Unfortunately, there are always parents or husbands to bypass, as is the case with Julia's Don Alonso and Haidée's father Lambro.

Juan is a passive character, unlike the legendary monster of depravity he was named after, prey to passionate and clever lovers, who wish for independence or represent female power in the highest sphere, as is the case of Gulbeyaz and even more of the empress Catherine II of Russia. They are both the opposite of Haidée, the comforting presence and loving nurse, a nostalgic reincarnation of Byron's first travel in Greece as a youth. Still in the Levant but corrupted by Oriental sensuality and power, Gulbeyaz uses her high position as favourite wife of the sultan to indulge her whim with Juan. Her voluptuous, imperious and dramatic Caroline-Lamb-like attitude cannot conquer his heart or body, which is mourning for Haidée. She has the hot blood of Byron's Italian lovers but such a different social status and arrogance, that Juan much rather enjoys the company of the simple odalisque Dudù than hers. M.K. Joseph¹⁸¹ suggests Lolah, Katinka and Dudù recall the three Macri sisters Teresa, Mariana and Katinka (one even has the same name), who had touched his heart in Athens in 1810. The description of these women aroused interest in the audience of the time, attracted by the mysterious Oriental vogue also thanks to paintings such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Great Odalisque* (1814), which identified the Orient with 'sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy.'¹⁸² These Dudù-like Odalisques of the Western imaginary had the appealing innocence, not of inexperience like Haidée, but of being accustomed to an immediate gratification of their whims, without considering morals, anyone else's feelings or the possibility of their own being denied, as Gulbeyaz does.

¹⁸⁰ *Byron e la cultura veneziana*, p. 101.

¹⁸¹ *Byron the Poet*, p. 176.

¹⁸² Edward Said (1978) *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York, found in A. Fabris Grube: *Byron, Venice and the East*, in *Byron e la cultura veneziana* p.132.



Nonetheless, power has some fascination on Juan as well, as can be seen when he is suddenly perverted by temptation at the court of 'Russia's royal harlot', the selfish and sensual Catherine II. To this older and dominating lover he is completely subdued until his position of object of desire makes him weary and ill. This reminds us of Byron's own entanglement with mature Lady Oxford and his embarrassment in behaving like a slave towards Teresa, who could decide over her *cavalier servente* even though she was much younger than him and nothing like the promiscuous, powerful Catherine. Her 'stable of lovers' as Barton calls it, was not a mere rumour and had received detailed attention from many historians Byron knew. However, apart from his personal dislike for the Empress, who did so little for the Greek cause, he inserted this single female historical figure in his work because of the reduction of her partners to sexual machines, a use that made Juan appear more seduced than seducer, corrupted rather than corrupting.

Equally dominant head of the English society, Lady Pinchbeck, dowager 'high in high circles, gentle in her own' (*DJ* XII, 48), is chosen as tutor for little Leila and introduces Juan into society as soon as he gets to England. The English cantos are of special interest because they do not deal with far away countries and incomprehensible exotic costumes, but present British society in a disillusioned and sarcastic way. Boyd¹⁸³ affirms that this section of the poem is as autobiographical as a story so completely fictionalized can be – Juan, within the limits of his fictional character and situation, has reached the state of mind Byron was in when he returned to England after his Grand Tour in 1811. Young, famous, dashing handsome but with no experience of the fashionable world and, Juan extracts the essence of the poet's reflections and adventures in high society. The aforesaid Lady Pinchbeck can be seen as a counterpart of Catherine II as far as position is concerned - she is an older, flirtatious queen of the beau monde, just as Lady Melbourne was. However, if the latter served as a model for the character, the

¹⁸³ E. French Boyd p. 69.

aspects they have in common are only the good ones, since Byron admired and loved his elderly friend very much and would never have described her in a desecrating way. The lascivious character of Catherine is not present in Lady Pinchbeck but rather in the predatory Duchess of Fitz-Fulke, for whose readily bestowed sensual love and autumnal beauty Lady Oxford could have provided the model. The most interesting thing about this fatal woman however, similar to the coquettish aristocratic ladies of Byron's acquaintance like Caroline Lamb or Lady Blessington, is that she represents the real seducer, in the way of Casanova and the whole libertine tradition. She even uses a masquerade to possess Juan, dressing up as a monk to get into his bed. With trickery the amoral lady takes advantage of Juan's unforeseen fear of the friar's ghost and quick-wittedly improvises seductive opportunity like a professional libertine. However, as Beatty underlines, Juan is not completely innocent, but accepts to be seduced by the simple proximity of the women around him. Love and sexual desire are closely intertwined, they are actually aroused immediately when a girl offers herself to him, and Juan never works to get what he wants. In this he is not a calculating seducer at all, not a *séducteur-né* but a *séducteur malgré lui*.

When, in earlier cantos, Juan was disguised as a woman to enter the Sultan's seraglio, the theme of the masquerade and cross-dressing was already present in an even more complicated way, since the Sultan really believes Juan is a girl called Juanna and finds interest in her. This episode corresponds to the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke gleefully masquerading as a monk and shows once again how the protagonist, prey to female mischief, enjoys the situation he finds himself in. As if to prove his hero's innocence, Byron depicts predatory women as taking the part of the libertine, making the man merely the object of their desire. How far this represents his own experience is hard to say.

Furthermore, we can see aspects of Byron's other aristocratic lovers in the ideal type of lady – Adeline Amundeville. She is the most complex character of all, combining nearly all of the poet's female acquaintances. Although he told Teresa he was studying Lady Blessington's character for *Don Juan's* Adeline, she embodies elements of other ladies too. Good and worldly as Lady Oxford; restless, brilliant and misunderstood 'champagne on ice' as Caroline Lamb; with a parliamentary, absent husband like both of them. Moreover she is said to be chaste, modest and learned, reflecting those characteristics of Annabella that Byron felt attracted to at first.

Her gothic house Norman Abbey echoes Byron's beloved Newstead Abbey, whose ghosts he grew up with and which accompanied him even after he sold the place. The magnificent house is the perfect setting for the gothic elements which animate the love-stories there. Whenever someone of the Amundeville family is about to die or do something terrible, the ghost of the monk appears, so the legend goes. He seems to foresee Lady Amundeville's fall and warn her. In

fact, Adeline's perfect marriage on surface has started to waver the moment she feels a strong attraction to Juan and realizes her union with her dry and pedantic husband is actually dead. This is not the only reason why in some way the Juan/Adeline episode reflects his relationship to Julia. However the English lady is less passionate and more sophisticated, so that the affair breaks off before it even began, since other women, like the Duchess interfere.

Another disturbing element in Adeline's approach to Juan is Aurora Raby. Her first introduction follows Byron's first introduction to his wife - similarly cool, detached and fascinating. In fact the beautiful and wealthy Catholic that Lady Amundeville wants to pair the hero off, has something precious and unyielding, as her name (Raby-Ruby) suggests. Names are not accidental in the English cantos. Juan is drawn to her for her cold reticence, just as Byron was to Annabella. She is no seductress and her moral standards make it impossible to separate love from matrimony. Maybe this is what stirs up the bored protagonist, before he gets carried away by the amoral Duchess. In her idealised description there is something of an angelically perfect dream-child, which may recall Byron's daughter, the lost Allegra grown up. As a matter of fact, his daughter was first called Alba, which is a synonym of Aurora, and only later did he change it into the Venetian name Allegra.

A character reflecting Claire seems to be absent from Juan's entourage, but the theme of undesired and unrequired love is present in Gulbeyaz's failed seduction of the protagonist. Furthermore, although Byron did probably not mean it that way, he feels more sympathy for the helpless pregnant country girl presented to Lord Amundeville with 'the problem of a double figure' in order 'to name a thing in nomenclature rather / Perplexing for most virgins - a child's father' (*DJ XVI, 67*), than he felt for Claire, who was in virtually the same situation.

We can detect something like parental pride and self-glorification in Juan's relationship with little Leila, who reminds us of Allegra. However, even in this instance we should not be too hasty in wanting to interpret fiction as autobiography. Juan's love for Leila is more complex than that of a father or brother, though there is certainly nothing sexual. Maybe Marchand¹⁸⁴ suggests Byron was trying to understand his own for such young girls as Lady Oxford's adolescent daughter Charlotte Harley (the *lanthe* of *Childe Harold*).

¹⁸⁴ *Byron's Poetry* p. 209.

5.8. Parallels – ‘You read my stanzas, and I read your features’ (DJ IV, 111)

All these parallels between real life and fiction are sometimes evident and sometimes very subjective. It would be exaggerated to look for autobiography even where the poet is using only his imagination or literary sources. *Don Juan* is a work of fiction, there is no doubt about that, as he says himself: ‘I sing of neither mine nor me, / Though every scribe in some slight turn of diction / Will hint allusions never meant’ (DJ XI, 88). Now we have underlined more than once how he likes to fool the reader by misleading him on purpose. Could not this statement be another obvious lie? It is even too natural and tempting to retrace the sources of inspiration from Byron’s love life in the poem; the important thing is to do it with caution. Scott himself had to admit that ‘You cannot for your soul avoid concluding that the author as he gives an account of his own travels [in *Childe Harold*] is also doing so in his own character.’¹⁸⁵ And if someone who knew Byron well was induced to suppose his poetry provided an almost unmediated knowledge of his mind and experiences, it was even more so for the audience, who felt his secrets to be public property.

We will try to find allusions to his muses in the text, starting from **Donna Inez**, alias the two Lady Byrons: Annabella Milbanke and Catherine Gordon. In this figure we can find information about various aspects of female life at the time – from being a frustrated and independent wife, wishing for divorce, to the widow in charge of an adolescent boy. The difficulties of both situations are underlined by the fact that neither her uncommon knowledge nor her high social position were of any help in finding happiness or freedom. Indeed, they were more of an impediment and caused her son’s (mis)adventures.

His mother was a learned lady, famed
For every branch of every science known –
In every Christian language ever named,
With virtues equalled by her wit alone:
She made the cleverest people quite ashamed,
And even the good with inward envy groan,
Finding themselves so very much exceeded,
In their own way, by all the things that she did.

Her favourite science was the mathematical,
Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity,
Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was Attic all,
Her serious sayings darkened to sublimity;
In short, in all things she was fairly what I call,
A prodigy [...]
(DJ I, 10, 12)

¹⁸⁵ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H.J. C. Grieserson, 12 vols (1932-37) Constable London. II: 98-99 found in Elfenbein p. 13.

The fact that Inez is a bluestocking lady, particularly fond of religion and mathematics, recalls Annabella so clearly that it appalled the audience. It was not the first time he had complained about some traits of her character that were so decidedly opposed to his, as this letter shows:

Lady Byron had good ideas, but could never express them; wrote poetry too, but it was only good by accident. Her letters were always enigmatical, often unintelligible. She was governed by what she called fixed rules and principles, squared mathematically. *Medwin* p. 40.

However, presenting her defects to the world in such a way was somewhat base of Byron, knowing that the reader would easily recognize her. Although he is writing in a comic tone, there is still deep resentment about her abandoning him and taking away their daughter, which makes his description very sharp-tongued and merciless. It pained Annabella to be thus represented: 'Her thoughts were theorems, her words a problem, / As if she deemed that mystery would ennoble 'em' (*DJ* I, 13), since she had a heart as well and was not 'a walking calculation' nor 'Morality's prim personification'. However, it should not be forgotten that although his wife may have served as a model, Inez is a purely fictional character with which the poet meant her no harm. It is rather an attack on women in general, especially those who have the worst fault of all – that of not having even one.

The marriage between Inez and Jose has much in common with Byron's own, both couples were leading an unhappy sort of life. When the narrator recalls how unexpectedly his experience as a husband developed, the sarcastic reference to Annabella is once more obvious:

I for my part (one 'modern instance' more,
'True, 'tis a pity—pity 't is, 't is true')
Was chosen from out an amatory score,
Albeit my years were less discreet than few,;
But though I also had reformed before
Those became one who soon were to be two,
I'll not gainsay the generous public's voice
That the young lady made a monstrous choice.
(*DJ* XII, 38)

Byron the commentator depicts himself as having been chosen unwisely, since public opinion was already against him at the time of his marriage and he himself had to admit that his reformation had been of no use, and as having been later abandoned for no precise reason. The reference to Inez's and Jose's attempted divorce is evidently shaped upon his personal experience:

For Inez called some druggist and physicians
And tried to prove her loving lord was mad,
But as he had some lucid intermissions,
She next decided he was only bad. [...]

She kept a journal, where his faults were noted,
And opened certain trunks of books and letters,
All which might, if occasion served, be quoted.
And then she had all Seville for abettors,
Besides her good old grandmother (who doted).
The hearers of her case became repeaters,
Then advocates, inquisitors, and judges,
Some for amusement, others for old grudges.
(*DJ I*, 27-28)

Caustic though it is, there is some truth. As we have seen Annabella really did write down in her diary the faults of her husband she meant to amend, she really did have a doting grandmother, who encouraged her separation and public opinion was generally favourable to her, ever more so after the publication of these scandalous verses. Byron's attempt to discharge himself by telling how she had tried to declare him mad, sending two doctors to prove it, did not work out as he had planned but actually turned against him. And this made him ever more frustrated: 'Calmly she heard each calumny that rose / And saw *his* agonies with such sublimity / That all the world exclaimed, "What magnanimity!"' (*DJ I*, 29). As a wife, Inez turns out to be a failure, and as a mother too, as will be seen. In the commentator's words: 'I've also seen some wives [...] / Who were the very paragons of wives, / Yet made the misery of at least two lives' (*DJ XIV*, 95), in this at least seeming to perceive that Annabella suffered as well from the collapsed marriage, though he makes the woman the sole responsible for it.

Apart from being a vituperative wife, Inez is first of all Juan's mother and has a great influence on the protagonist's fate, just as the creator's mother had. Byron's difficult relationship with his dominating mother has already been analysed, so it is no wonder the elements we find reflected in the poem are not flattering. First of all, Donna Inez is a tyrant, unhappily married and excessively preoccupied with her son. She is the apotheosis of hypocrisy, especially regarding religion and education. After an unhappy marriage, in which both partners were 'Wishing each other, not divorced, but dead' but still managed to live 'respectably as man and wife' (*DJ I*, 26), she was suddenly left a widow in charge of her only son. 'Inez became sole guardian, which was fair, / And answered but to Nature's just demands. / An only son left with an only mother / Is brought up much more wisely than another' (*DJ I*, 37). This last remark is wholly ironical, since Juan's education proves a complete failure and does not turn out at all as his mother had expected. On the contrary, his ignorance of the world and its falsity, fostered by her bigotry, is the cause of his subsequently becoming the Don Juan of the legend. It is not a coincidence that

Juan is always involved far less with men than with women, since from his childhood the most dominant figure was female and the same thing could be said of Byron. Despite keeping him away from any kind of sexual temptation, it is Inez who brings together Juan and Julia, of whom she is perhaps jealous for having married her former sweetheart Alonso. After Julia is locked into a convent and Juan has been singled out by Catherine's 'maternal love' (incidentally Catherine was also the name of Byron's mother), she informs him that she remarried and gave birth to a child. We are led to suspect her second husband is precisely Alonso and that she may have planned the whole seduction from the first, in her hypocritical way of playing dumb.

Julia is Juan's first, unhappy love, the first woman to introduce him into that dangerous world of seduction and passion that will cause so many of his troubles. Young and beautiful, she recalls the common condition of a girl married to an older man she does not love. Her education and religious beliefs can control her passions only for a short time, during which mind and body are struggling, destined to succumb to that uncurbed force of first love. She reminds us of Byron's infatuation with Mary Duff, his distant cousin and 'first of flames, before most people begin to burn'¹⁸⁶; and of that with Mary Chaworth, another purely platonic love.

There is a sense of regret for that happy, irrevocable situation of life when two young people fall in love for the first time and discover their feelings. Julia is presented as 'married, charming, chaste, and twenty-three' (*DJ* I, 59) – in first place 'married', which makes her love for Juan impossible but for precisely that reason more desperate and romantic. Like many of Byron's mistresses she belongs to the bourgeois and domestic world, which means she has an older husband, naturally destined to become a cuckold, as the poet naughtily suggests.

Wedded she was some years and to a man
Of fifty, and such husbands are in plenty;
And yet I think instead of such a one
'Twere better to have two of five and twenty,
Especially in countries near the sun.
And now I think on't, *mi vien in mente*,
Ladies even of the most uneasy virtue
Prefer a spouse whose age is short of thirty.
(*DJ* I, 62)

Julia's virtue is indeed 'uneasy', but she soon falls from innocence and pays for it. Serious, highly romantic and even sad moments, like her heart-breaking goodbye letter are alternated with comic and ironic ones. Her situation is at once humorous and pathetic, according to

¹⁸⁶ *Lord Byron's Journal*, November 17th 1813, in Quennell: *Byron – A Self-Portrait*, p. 211.

Marchand¹⁸⁷. The objective picture of her self-deception in believing her love for Juan to be Platonic and calculatingly putting her husband in the wrong without shame while hiding his rival in her bed, is mixed with a tolerant sympathy for her frailty. It is not her fault if she cannot control the passion arising inside her young heart; she was somehow destined to be dominated by her hot, Moorish blood. This vision of more passionate and uncontrolled southern beauties represents the widespread belief of the time, that hotter climates produced more violent passions.

The darkness of her oriental eye
Accorded with her Moorish origin.
Her blood was not all Spanish, by the by;
In Spain, you know, this is a sort of sin.
(*DJ I*, 56)

Indeed her great-great-grandmother passed sin on to her, behaving as many a well-born lady in cold England: "Tis said that Donna Julia's grandmamma / Produced her Don more heirs at love than law' (*DJ I*, 52). If in this instance the poet tries to justify her innate passion, he sneers at her vain idealism in other parts of the poem, showing how useless it is to subdue feelings with philosophy. Her ineffectual belief in Platonism, recalls Frances Wedderburn Webster, the young and demure wife of a friend, Byron had made love to in his youth, underlining her platonic vision of love more than once: 'I think Platonism in some peril' under his attacks he told Lady Melbourne. However, his 'little Platonist' did not behave like Julia and maintained her honour, also thanks to the poet's self-control, which Juan could not share. Perhaps the affair might have ended differently if she had clung only to her ideals.

Although Julia feels guilty for betraying her old husband, as much as Teresa did, she abandons herself completely and becomes a sly adulteress, never regretting what she did. There is a proud force in her sentimentalism and at once a defenceless impotence in front of the morals, her public status and her own heart, which closely recall Augusta's forbidden love for Byron. Julia is not predatory at all, she shortly enjoys an overwhelming passion she is a prey to and for which she is harshly punished. In her good-bye letter she says 'To love too much has been the only art I used. [...] I loved, I love you and for that have lost / State, station, heaven, mankind's, my own esteem, / And yet cannot regret what it hath cost' (*DJ I*, 192-3). Her strong feelings prove that 'Man's love is of his life a thing apart, / 'Tis woman's whole existence' and make her sadly foresee that while she lingers in a convent, Juan 'will proceed in beauty and pride, / Beloved and loving many' (*DJ I*, 194-195) but she will always remain his faithful first love.

¹⁸⁷ *Byron's Poetry* p. 172.

Haidée combines several features which Byron could have separated into distinct figures. On the one hand, with her 'lovely female face of seventeen' (*DJ* II, 112), 'gazelle eyes' (*DJ* II, 202) particularly dear to the poet, auburn hair and white skin, she is the emblem of pure beauty and innocence, a jewel preserved from contamination with the world by being the spoilt and subdued daughter of a tyrannical father living on a remote island; on the other hand, she manages to live out her dream and follow her passion helped by an older female servant and her wit, an oft repeated scheme in theatre – Shakespeare's *Tempest* and Goldoni's plays are only two examples- and the reality of daughters and wives fooling their male protectors at that time.

She is not only 'Nature's bride' but also 'Passion's child' (*DJ* II, 202); her passions are tender with Juan but 'in their full growth' she has her father's 'fixed ferocity' (*DJ* IV, 41) and is like 'a lioness, though tame'. Had she not had a strong will of her own, she could have been mistaken for the passive prey to a reckless seducer, who fortunately meets a tender-hearted man to whom she is faithful to the end – 'She was one / Made but to love, to feel that she was his / Who was her chosen' (*DJ* II, 202). Haidée is more than that, she knows what she wants - her ignorance, her devotion similar to a loving wife's and the hidden power of her feelings remind us of a 'natural aristocrat, ruler of her own domain'¹⁸⁸ like La Fornarina. However, Byron did not have an idyllic romance with her as Juan did with Haidée. Indeed, the episode on the Greek island has been compared to Eden, with its inevitable hidden snake, or a dream of untouched purity too far from real life to last longer than a fleeting spring season or the years of youth. Their love-story is so perfect that it resembles a fairy-tale, doomed to end tragically – Haidée and Juan, as well as the reader, know that it will not be forever, but they are allowed to live the moment, without restrictions, duties or worries of any kind by that magic timeless atmosphere of ignorance about social conventions.

Haidée spoke no word of scruples, asked no vows
Nor offered any; she had never heard
Of plight and promises to be a souse,
Or perils by a loving maid incurred.
She was all which pure ignorance allows
And flew to her young mate like a young bird,
And never having dreamt of falsehood, she
Had not one word to say of constancy.
(*DJ* II, 190)

¹⁸⁸ M.K. Joseph p. 245.

The other element she has in common with his Italian lovers is the fact that she speaks a different language, which the protagonist has to learn. This awakens sweet memories in the author:

'T is pleasing to be schooled in a strange tongue
By female lips and eyes [...]
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'
(*DJ II*, 164-5)

This remark makes us suddenly aware that Byron is slyly putting on the mask of a fictional character again; trying to fool the reader, for it was precisely from female teachers he learned Italian, in a less innocent way.

The beautiful Greek girl is too perfect and untouched to resemble any actual love-affair of the poet's life, apart from his platonic admiration for the Maid of Athens - Theresa Macri , with whom he was disillusioned because, like Haidée, she was equally controlled by one of her parents. Nonetheless, Lambro's fierceness is in her blood and after her 'natural marriage' to Juan she becomes a little more cunning, like Eve after eating the forbidden fruit, as Beatty remarks. In fact this simile is fitting since soon after that, Juan is exiled from that Paradise and sent on his next adventure by the pirate king, who has much in common with Ali Pacha, Byron's admired Albanian acquaintance. Curiously he defined the Muslim lord's benevolent behaviour to him as that of a father and later chose to give some of his traits to Haidée's despotic father. In a very short period of time Haidée grows up from girl to woman, through the loss of innocence she gains experience and develops her pride, facing up to her responsibilities towards her father like an authentic heroine:

A minute past, and she had been all tears
And tenderness and infancy, but now
She stood as one who championed human fears.
Pale, statue-like, and stern, she wooed the blow;
And tall beyond her sex and their compeers,
She drew up to her height, as if to show
A fairer mark, and with a fixed eye scanned
Her father's face, but never stopped his hand.
(*DJ IV*, 43)

This is not the only part in which the poet shows a sort of respect when dealing with Haidée, the tone is less ironical than with other female characters. The pathos of her death, for instance, is unalloyed by any flippancy, for she was, in Marchand's¹⁸⁹ words, of all his heroines the

¹⁸⁹ *Byron's Poetry – A Critical Introduction* p. 187.

embodiment of his youthful ideals of innocence, beauty, and tenderness. The narrator quickly resumes his tongue-in-cheek tone when Juan meets an Italian company on the ship and rouses the interest of a pretty Romagnole, not unlike his Italian Teresa. The complicated situation between Juan, Haidée and Lambro might also echo that between Byron, Teresa and her husband. Anyhow, from there he is tossed on the shores of Constantinople.

The Sultana shares Byron's Italian lover's exquisite beauty – 'Her form had all the softness of her sex, / Her features all the wetness of the devil' (*DJ V*, 109), magnificence – she rises 'with such an air / As Venus' and 'Bent like an antelope' (*DJ V*, 96), the poet's favourite comparison when describing a woman -; and their passion. She quickly passes from crying to anger, is furiously jealous and then tame and submissive with her husband, whom she betrays behind his back. By comparing Gulbeyaz to a goddess and a devil, the poet points out how her mighty 'imperial and imperious' passion is bound up with egotism; she forces Juan to dress up as a woman but wants to be possessed by him as a man. Like many mistresses turned to wives, she uses her role, gained thanks to her overpowering beauty and lofty presence, to fool her husband and is not accustomed to defeats – when she cannot get what she desires, she acts impulsively with a graceful tyranny like Marianna or Margherita. The realistic and vivid description of the behaviour of the spurned Sultana, who cannot believe Juan does not obey her order to become her lover, owes its verve to Byron's first hand observations of such scenes, not only in Italy but also in England, especially to the fury of Caroline Lamb's tantrums. 'Her first thought was to cut off Juan's head; / Her second, to cut only his – acquaintance' a tongue in cheek reference to Italian overhasty wrath. 'Her third, to ask him where he had been bred; / Her fourth, to rally him into repentance' – the belief that rationality can dominate over passions and amend unfitting behaviours was typical of Annabella. 'Her fifth, to call her maids and go to bed;' a passive gesture of seeking refuge among other women and ignoring the problem, which reminds us of Augusta. 'Her sixth, to stab herself; her seventh to sentence / The lash to Baba' – a clear reference to Caroline's dramatic attempted suicide and her habit of putting the blame on others in order to appear unjustly wronged. And finally a resolution that unites all women: 'her grand resource / Was to sit down again, and cry – of course' (*DJ V*, 139). Having tried all her powers, she ends up by using the most powerful female weapon: tears - 'For women shed and use them at their liking. [...] To them 'tis a relief, to us a torture' (*DJ V*, 118). Yet it is in vain. There is something wanting, despite her beauty and power; Juan resists her, though he starts to grow weak when she shows her softer side, that natural teaching of love that power cannot spoil and of which women, 'whatsoever their nation' (*DJ V*, 120), are more capable than men.

Comparing women of different nations but similar feelings, it appears that Gulbeyaz and Byron's Italian mistresses were equally childish and unable to renounce their sexual power over their man or share him with others; but rather than losing him, they even accept his unfaithfulness. As soon as Gulbeyaz suspects Juan may have betrayed her during his night in the harem, she sends him away and then regrets it. Marianna would have done the same when she found Byron with her sister-in-law but calmed down in time. And we have already witnessed La Fornarina's fury against other women and her assurance that Byron would always come back to her. In this sense the Sultana represents another kind of female ideal for the poet, not the shy prey, but the exciting and exotic predator whom only a strong man can handle.

For Byron in particular, the Sultana is a synonym for lavish, untouchable and therefore desirable but unlikely lover, as can be seen from a tongue-in-cheek threat to his mother about his improbable marriage to a Turkish girl: 'If I wed, I will bring home a Sultana, [...] and reconcile you to an Ottoman daughter-in-law' (August 11th 1809). The remark was meant to tease his mother and did not reflect the poet's actual opinion about the haughty and sweet self-willed beauties he imagined behind the walls of the harem. Gulbeyaz certainly had the makings of an erotic and exotic dream, from which, nonetheless, it is a relief to wake up: 'She was the sultan's bride (thank heaven, not mine)' (*DJ V*, 111).

Catherine II is a wonderful example of how too much power in a depraved woman's hands can be dangerous: 'In Catherine's reign, whom glory still adores / As greatest of all sovereigns and whores' (*DJ VI*, 92). Moreover, her character shows how historical truth combines with autobiographical elements and fiction. Byron did not know Russia nor the Empress personally, of course, though he had read something of her character and habits, especially her love for the grenadiers and lieutenants of artillery, as Marchand remarks. Nonetheless, it is more important to keep in mind that he 'makes no pretence to historical accuracy but is more concerned with things he does know, the nature of women and the weakness of men.'¹⁹⁰ Byron knew what it was like for a boy to be suddenly courted by a court instead of courting and to fall in love with an older woman, or into 'self-love', as happened to him with languid Lady Oxford. Though he felt always grateful for her 'maternal love' (as both Catherine's and Lady Oxford may be defined), the initiative towards the poet had come once again from the lady's side and there was certainly more than simple attraction between them - the role of powerful worldly protector flattered the inexperienced youth in Byron's as well as Juan's case:

¹⁹⁰ Marchand: *Byron's Poetry*, p. 207.

He, on the other hand, if not in love,
Fell into that no less imperious passion,
Self-love, which, when some sort of thing above
Ourselves, a singer, dancer, much in fashion,
Or duchess, princess, empress 'deigns to prove'
('Tis Pope's phrase) a great longing, though a rash one,
For one especial person out of many
Makes us believe ourselves as good as any.
(*DJ IX*, 68)

Unfortunately this feeling is of short duration and as vain as the world in which it was bred. What remains are trouble and disillusionment, from which, Byron knew, arose the need of a journey abroad to get free from an over-complicated relationship, destroyed by an unbalanced relationship between the partners and an unwholesome accompaniment of cant. Again this episode gives him the opportunity to complain about hypocrisy, especially concerning the high spheres and society's willing blindness in front of scandal, when it suits them. It is Juan's mother, though she is pitied and defined 'no hypocrite' at last, to formulate this self-deception:

She could not too much give her approbation
Unto an Empress who preferred young men,
Whose age and what was better still, whose nation
And climate stopped all scandal (now and then).
(*DJ X*, 33)

This Empress preferring young men is said to be 'handsome' (*IX*, 63), 'rosy, ripe and succulent' (*IX*, 62) and she 'had a touch / Of sentiment' (*IX*, 54). A more detailed description presents her as an exuberant and truculent but still desirable madam with an insatiable sexual appetite. The fact that she appears somewhat plump and chubby but still fascinating, recalls a description of young Teresa Guiccioli. She certainly had not reduced her sexual consciousness to commercial calculation like the Empress, but she knew how to bind somebody to her and keep him under her control. Imperious like Lady Oxford, she makes the youth's head turn dizzy with sensuality and self-love. But she stands for absolute power in its most tyrannical form, a unique and absolutely exceptional position for a woman at that time, and as Byron suggests, maybe it is for the best that it was so.

Lady Pinchbeck is the typical representative of powerful dowager in English high society, which she controls and wants to be an example for, despite her not irreprehensible past. She has very much in common with the most worldly and powerful of Byron's female friends, Lady Melbourne and Lady Blessington. Whether because of age or situation in life at the time he met them, they were both just friends for the poet and not lovers. Juan is not attracted to Lady Pinchbeck in a sensual way, his fondness arises from thankfulness for her taking care of little

Leila's education and introducing him to the complicated social world of London – 'the royal game of Goose'. Like Lady Melbourne, Lady Pinchbeck has been a little gay in youth and is therefore wise enough to see Juan's merits without falling in love with him and to warn him "gainst the woe / Which the mere passionless can never know' (DJ XII, 44), although the real women Byron may have taken as models did not learn enough from their mistakes to prevent others. Still, they have merits. When the poet says: 'She thought him a good heart at bottom, / A little spoilt, but not so altogether' (DJ XII, 49), he is most certainly remembering how his elderly friend took him under her wing, recognizing him for what he was, despite what society thought. Both the fictional and the real character understand the youths' passionate natures, since they themselves were like that and learned from their past errors. In her old days, having become 'High in high circles, and gentle in her own, / She was the mild reprove of the young' (DJ XII, 48) and is admired for that. Although his memory of Lady Melbourne is full of respect and gratitude, Byron cannot stop himself from making a few sarcastic comments, which refer more to Lady Blessington than to Lady Melbourne. Both went astray, but the former definitely more than the latter, which may explain her over-eagerness in wanting to restore her tarnished reputation:

I said that Lady Pinchbeck had been talked about,
 As who has not, if female, young, and pretty?
 But now no more the ghost of Scandal stalked about.
 She merely was deemed amiable and witty,
 And several of her best *bon mots* were hawked about.
 The she was given to charity and pity
 And passed (at least the latter years of life)
 For being a most exemplary wife.
 (DJ XII, 47)

Having her *bon mots* or rather articles and books published, was one of Lady Blessington's major achievements, while Lady Melbourne remained in public opinion an admirable wife and mother despite her giddy past. Though the poet uncovers some weak and petty aspects of the worldly ladies he knew and portrayed in Lady Pinchbeck, he was grateful for what they had done to him, as Juan is. In a very personal comment he appears to thank them in some way for their unselfish support:

I've also seen some female friends ('tis odd,
 But true, if expedient, I could prove)
 That faithful were through thick and thin, abroad,
 At home, far more than ever yet was love,
 Who did not quit me when oppression trod
 Upon me, whom no scandal could remove,
 Who fought and fight in absence too my battles,
 Despite the snake society's loud rattles.
 (DJ XIV, 96)

Lady Adeline Amundeville, the 'splendid sinner' and one of 'the loveliest oligarchs of our gynocracy' (*DJ XII*, 66), embodies the perfect lady: 'highborn, wealthy by her father's will, / And beauteous, even where beauties most abound: / In Britain' (*DJ XIII*, 2). She combines all the good qualities of Byron's aristocratic acquaintances to form a 'frozen' ideal on the brink of doom, 'the fair most fatale Juan ever met, / although she was not evil nor meant ill, / But destiny and passion spread their net' (*DJ XIII*, 12). The author seems to take delight in exploring her depths while creating her, which makes her escape easy identification. It is possible to see some traits, habits and occupations of the brilliant ladies of high society Byron knew, like Lady Oxford or Caroline Lamb, busy 'queen bee[s] amidst the gay world's hum' organizing parties, going to events, being talked about in newspapers, arranging marriages and entertaining their friends with witty conversation and gossip, next to being wives and mothers. The only thing that makes Adeline different from these models, is her absence of coquetry, which she 'disdained to wear', and her not ever having been unfaithful to her husband. In fact 'chaste she was to detraction's desperation' (*DJ XIII*, 14). Her virtuous striving for perfection recalls some of the unspoiled as well as the spoiled qualities of Annabella, when the poet first met her, especially when she starts pondering to save Juan's soul through marriage with another lady in order to suppress her illicit passion. There is also a reference to Frances Webster's struggle to keep the relationship with the poet platonic. Since Lady Amundeville's union with her husband is like Frances's 'serene and noble, conjugal, but cold' (*DJ XIV*, 86), the lurking demon of intense intentions makes his dangerous appearance, tuning good intentions into perdition. This demon is helped also by her being 'no deep judge of character' adding colouring from her own to her inexperienced analysis of others, a charge that could be moved also against Lady Blessington, like Adeline 'half a poetess', and all those ladies, who in their high expectations attributed self-deceiving traits to the poet like the hostess does with Juan.

Adeline is the quintessence of the feminine mind and heart, learned, modest, beautiful, chaste, 'polite without parade', worldly but not vain, brilliant and talented. Her perfectly balanced universe however is shaken by her sudden interest in Juan – 'beneath the snow, / As a volcano holds the lava' (*DJ XIII*, 36). Under her cold surface of perfection as in many similar cases, the poet suggests, there is a 'hidden nectar' just waiting to be discovered, something 'beyond all price / When once you have broken their confounded ice' (*DJ XIII*, 38). The fact that repressed passions are often the most violent ones, was known to Byron from his adventures with outwardly demure but intimately volcanic mistresses, but not to Juan, still quite a beginner 'cruising o'er the ocean woman'. Her 'marble which had no defect' is seriously threatened by the stranger's presence, who might fill the vacant space in the 'splendid mansion' of her heart though we will never know how the poet intended to develop their relationship.

Juan's self-assurance is upset as well by numerous accidents in Norman Abbey – the magic of the place itself, which reflects Byron's nostalgia for Newstead Abbey, the home he spent his lost youth in; the triangle of *femmes fatales* interested in him, his inability to make out mysterious Aurora, the appearance of the ghost and Adeline's as well as the Duchess' intrigues. Adeline, called 'Dian of the Ephesians' disapproves of 'her frolic Grace's' free conduct without admitting to herself, or perhaps knowing, the real cause of her disquiet – feeling jealousy for Juan's interest in Aurora, she starts to be aware of her own feelings for the foreigner and wants to keep him under her control – if not by possessing him, at least by deciding who will have him. 'She was, or thought she was, his friend [...] But of such friendship as man's may to man be, / She was as capable as woman can be (DJ XIV, 92). Her attempted Lady Melbourne-like matchmaking, which by the way is women's favourite though ruinous pastime according to the narrator, and her disinterested friendship fail, as did Miss Milbanke's, because they are not sincere and hide deeper passions. Adeline and Annabella cannot save Juan's/Byron's soul as long as they do not know their own heart – 'Friendship is a dangerous word for young ladies; it is Love full-fledged, and waiting for a fine day to fly' the poet told Medwin.

These contradictions, though taken from real life and blended together masterfully, do not make Lady Amundeville a convincing character but rather a someone 'playing her grand role' and 'Some doubt how much of Adeline was real, / So well she acted all and every part' (DJ XIV, 96-97). However, the poet dispels this doubt by explaining her behaviour to reflect the mobility of temperament and not of art of certain ladies, who although acting are in their own way sincere because their mask is easy to detect, if not for themselves at least by an attentive observer.

Her frolic Grace the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke, the mischief-making flirt, gathers together the coquettish and intriguing attitudes of some of Byron's London acquaintances, in an exaggerated and comic way. The complete opposite of her rivals Adeline and Aurora, this 'fine and somewhat full-blown blonde, / desirable, distinguished, celebrated / For several winters in the grand, *grand monde*' (DJ XIV, 42), wife of pompous Lord Augustus Fitz-Plantagenet 'pitied with sincere regret' (DJ XIV, 44), embodies unconventional sensuality and sexual enterprise. Many married women of the time were well-known adulteresses, surprisingly free from social disapproval as long as they conformed to certain rules of secrecy and outward respectability, helped also by their cuckold husbands complaisance. Still, neither Lady Oxford, nor Caroline Lamb, nor Lady Blessington would have attempted such an amoral and tricky seduction, exploiting the prey's

fear to possess him; but they all knew how to intrigue, sweet-talk, have a tantrum or flatter in order to get what they wanted.

Her Grace too passed for being an intrigante,
And somewhat *méchante* in her amorous sphere;
One of those pretty, precious plagues, which haunt
A lover with caprices soft and dear,
They like to *make* a quarrel, when they can't
Find one, each day of the delightful year;
Bewitching, torturing, as they freeze or glow,
And – what is worst of all – won't let you go.

The sort of thing to turn a man's head,
Or make a Werther of him in the end.
(DJ XIV, 63-64)

Caroline Lamb comes to our mind immediately when we read about caprices and the inability to let the lover go. She certainly was the most pretty, precious plague that ever haunted Byron. Also her love for quarrel and scenes made her request 'Remember me' superfluous - how could he ever forget her?, the poet asked in his poem of the same title. Lady Blessington and Oxford, though a little more reserved, could be slightly *méchantes*, as some episodes showed. The former made Teresa believe Byron was in love with her, the latter demanded he should leave Caroline if he wanted to have a relationship with her and dictated his good-bye letter herself, according to some rumours. All the malicious and base feminine behaviours he had witnessed or heard come comically and erotically together in the figure of the Duchess, who 'loved *tracasserie*' and started to treat overpowered Juan with 'some small *agacerie*' (DJ XIV, 41). Even her name recalls a sexual scandal, since the illegitimate wife of the Prince of Wales since 1785 was the sensual and much-maligned Mrs Fitzherbert, whom the poet might have been referring to, since he did not particularly admire his royal highness.

Moreover, as a sexual adventurer her Grace could be defined as a female Byron, showing his same spirit of enterprise and irony:

Her laughing blue eyes with a glance could seize
The ridicules of people in all places,
That honey of your fashionable bees,
And store it up for mischievous enjoyment,
And this at present was her kind employment.
(DJ XVI, 100)

Uninhibited in the use of her womanly powers and able to make fun of what surrounds her, she is treated rather sympathetically by the author. Marchand¹⁹¹ suggests that though she is not a type that could hold the sentimental romantic permanently, he rather delights in contrasting her

¹⁹¹ Byron's Poetry p. 225.

unhypocritical brashness (which recalls some features of Byron's simple Italian adventures we may add) with the subtler self-deceptions of Adeline and Aurora's unapproachable presence. Byron introduces three very different types of woman in the short space of the few English cantos. Their reaction to the legend of the Amundeville ghost shows their nature in a handful of lines – Adeline is the one to tell it, in her harmonious voice and prey to her own restrictions she 'stages' the whole drama. Aurora, the elusive prey shows nothing but a calm surprise at Juan's discomposure while Lady Fitz-Fulke plays with her veil, looks hard at the youth without saying a word but planning her predatory assault. Thank God there is a human character among this perfection, the narrator exclaims. A little fascinating malice, he says, is quite necessary or 'we should suppose us quite in heaven' (*DJ XIV*, 49).

Aurora Raby on the contrary, seems to come from heaven: 'She looked as if she sat by Eden's door / and grieved for those who could return no more' (*DJ XV*, 45). An unexplained sadness, remote like a star, characterizes this angelic child-like figure, who perhaps has some traits of how Byron imagined his dead daughter Allegra might have been as a grown-up. Aurora is a complex character, mainly characterized by superior purity, which make her Haidée's less natural but still lovely and sincere English counterpart. Representing a female ideal not to be found in reality, she belongs neither to the world of Byron's 'ordinary romantic heroines' nor the fashionable English society, for Beatty. Actually he establishes the illusion that she possesses a life independent of his mind, although he created her as a fictional character and is not, as in other instances, using historical figures. This makes her so real and many-sided. Together with the coquettish Duchess, she is an opposite pure force in the house Adeline cannot control and therefore fears. Maybe that is why Lady Amundeville tries to drive Juan into their sphere, because she acknowledges they can handle him better than she can, in her struggle against temptation. Unconsciously she is jealous, but she puts a brave face on things and accepts the unforeseen developments. When the host intimates marriage as the customary solution for her and Juan's libido, he does not reject the idea and singles out Aurora as a suitable bride, mostly because she shares his catholic 'sincere and austere' faith. Adeline's intense hostility had not even considered the well-learned orphan, follower of 'Minerva rather than the Graces', as a possible match, nor did she imagine the Duchess would trick herself into Juan's arms. Although he continues on his trail of dissolution and seduction, marriage appears desirable for the first time in the protagonist's eyes, who had never had a possibility of marrying any of his previous lovers since they were either married, too powerful or exotic to be taken into consideration. Perhaps in this Aurora reflects Annabella or rather what he imagined and hoped she would turn

out when he could be persuaded to marry her or could persuade her to marry him. As we said, Byron did not believe in marriage as a durable institution but saw it rather as a punishment comparable to Hell and still had to decide which one he would chose for Juan's end. We will never find out if the author would have let Juan settle down in England and become a respectable member of that false society by marrying, or if his travels would have pushed him farther.

Truth and fiction in love, war, a tempest, are the work's main themes. It is so much mimesis of life, as Beatty goes on, that the work ends when Byron dies, as if it was part of his life. Seen in this light the poem assumes some traits of memoirs or confessions, written at the end of Byron's existence, when he felt old and depressed but still filled with a last spark of true inspiration.

Conclusion

Having seen all these different destinies of women around Byron, who influenced him or whom he influenced, we get a more complete image of what the situation of English as well as Italian women in the early nineteenth century was like. The consequences of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, as well as the diffusion of new Romantic ideals were felt more or less strongly in the different countries. This shift towards sensibility, social realism and evanescence, according to Jennifer Keith, 'has been explained as a consequence of the on-going inquiries of the Enlightenment itself, whose effect also led to the French Revolution – an event that although usually associated with Romantic Literature can be seen as culmination of Enlightenment thinking'.¹⁹² Church, religion and power controlled the morals at least officially in a time of change and reorganization that would lead to modern Europe.

Napoleon was another important source of influence for society and Byron himself, who often compared his destiny to that of the French emperor under many aspects as Longford points out. 'They both did not behave chivalrously towards women, both loved their sister and were controlled by their mothers, both were superstitious sceptics and both were defeated in the course of one year by orthodoxy: Napoleon by the military establishment and Byron by the social one.'¹⁹³ In Byron's own words: 'Like me, he had perhaps too great a contempt for women; he treated them as puppets, as though he could make them dance at any time by pulling the wires' and 'Napoleon was his own antithesis... master of his own destiny; of that at least his enemies could not deprive him. He should have gone off the stage like a hero: it was expected of him.'¹⁹⁴ This romantic attitude towards Bonaparte reflected his own situation quite remarkably - how much was the poet expected to do and say as well to live up to the established idea of hero? Moreover it was a Whig convention of the time but Byron was still more ardent. When he took the name of Noel in 1822, he loved to point out that he and Napoleon signed with the same initials: N.B. He compared himself to Bonaparte not only for their similar biography, but also in a figurative sense when talking about his poetry. He ruefully describes himself as 'grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme' (*DJ XI*, 55) and compared his recent disasters – *Don Juan*, *Marino Faliero* and *Cain* - to Moscow, Leipzig and Waterloo. With this openly stated admiration for Napoleon or George Washington, both detested by the English masters of public opinion, he increased his bad reputation, which, as we said, was less influenced by his libertine habits than by his radical enthusiasms.

¹⁹² *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry* p. 286.

¹⁹³ Longford p. 13.

¹⁹⁴ *Medwin* p. 184.

Reading Byron's biography, diary and letters opens a new perspective on womanhood and social conventions rigidly observed by a society condoning at the same time all kinds of moral laxity in an extremely interesting epoch, on which there is still some light to be thrown. Byron was often associated with radical ideas because of his irreverent and, in his own caustic way, his sympathetic handling of troublesome themes, which threatened to knock off balance the social system of his country as well as that of the countries he was living in. Only towards the end of his life did he become a revolutionary fighter for Greek freedom, but already in an earlier period he had always found it difficult to follow conventions, unless when they suited his free spirit.

The theme of women, seen as predators at first sight when reading many of his diaries and poems, leads us to a completely different conclusion if we understand his sympathy and pity for the female situation of his time. It is true that many of his mistresses were self-willed adulteresses and coquettes, hypocrites or drama-queens, but these forms of behaviour were a product of the time, a natural and always man-dominated escape from their limited life. Betraying their husbands and becoming predators, they were still prey to other men and most of all, the prey to society, which made them precious objects on sale in the marriage-market, in England as well as in Italy. Byron doubtlessly wrote as a man, not intending in the least to subvert the system or grant women more rights or social equality. He enjoyed their company as long as it pleased him and critiqued every single negative aspect of womanhood – cold coquettes, splendid sinners, designing mothers, Bluestockings, faithless wives, heiresses, fortune-hunters, immoral hypocrites etc. However, by doing this, he gives us a complete picture of what being a woman was, with more insight than most of the other authors of the time. In the end, Julia and Haidée, Gulbeyaz and Dudù, Catherine and Leila, Adeline, Aurora and Lady Fitz-Fulke, even Lady Pinchbeck or the pregnant country girl in the scarlet cloak, who reminds him of some 'sad mishap' of his past he luckily mended by paying a 'few parish fees since' (*DJ* XVI, 61), are manifestations of different facets of all womankind, to which the protagonist as well as the commentator feel drawn. What M.K. Joseph defines as a 'whirlwind burlesque tour across Europe'¹⁹⁵ was too upsetting at the time, and in certain instances still is, to be fully understood. Only by looking beyond the surface, behind the mask of irony, as Byron himself teaches us to do, can we detect the undertone of morality and a realistic picture of the whole society in which 'sexual misdemeanour was less heinous than chaste treachery'¹⁹⁶.

Perhaps, in addition to that, the most important lesson the poet can give is to separate poetry and life again, after they combined so tightly that there is hardly any difference. Byron moulded

¹⁹⁵ *Byron the Poet* p. 245.

¹⁹⁶ Strickland p. 82.

his poems to record every nuance of his thought and feeling, knowing that his audience would then read it and see into his soul. Did inspiration for poetry come from life or was his life deliberately adventurous to feed his poetry, its mirror? Which one shaped the other? His life somehow looks like a formless form as well, just like his work. However, there was an unconscious deliberate wish that led him to search for eternal truths behind all the casualties of our brief existence. In his own way he was following a plan, mostly influenced by spontaneous decisions, but with a clear aim – to shape his life according to all the shapes it could have.

The theme of truth and masquerade is extremely fascinating and complicated since Byron was a master of putting on masks but delighted in looking behind others, although this process was often painful and made him feel insecure about his own. Every new relationship, every new journey and affair was material for his work, a new part to play and a mask to wear. Becoming a *cavalier servente* in Italy is only one example of how surprisingly ready the poet often was to play the part others had assigned to him. In some way, disguise is an essential trait of all human beings - perhaps even more so in Byron's case; after all the Latin term *persona* meant first of all mask and then person. Taking up different roles for the poet meant showing what the world wanted to see and admire in a Romantic hero or shocking it with unexpected actions, which were actually expected from a rascal such as he was deemed to be. When could Byron be himself without feeling prey to the position a predatory society had pushed him into? Was he not aware of being trapped by circumstance, when he struck back desperately by writing *Don Juan*, his attempt to break free? Under how many layers was he hidden, just like his club foot, which he never showed anyone and ordered to be amputated immediately after his death? His imperfections were either exaggerated or loathed, covered by the mask of boasting or shyness. He was well-aware of this paradoxical opposition in his character and the false images of different Byrons that were circulating at the time and even more so after his death. To Lady Blessington he uttered his amused speculations concerning his present and future biographers, blinded by prejudice and the innumerable masks he had decided to put on or had been forced to wear, making the masquerade go on eternally with roles he knew well:

People take for gospel all I say, and go away continually with false impressions. *Mais n'importe!* It will render the statements of my future biographers more amusing; [...] One will represent me as a sort of sublime misanthrope, with moments of kind feeling. This, *par exemple*, is my favourite rôle. Another will portray me as a modern Don Juan; and a third [...] as an amiable, ill-used gentleman, 'more sinned against than sinning.' Now, if I know myself, I should say, that I have no character at all... I am so changeable [...] There are but two sentiments to which I am constant, - a strong love of liberty, and a detestation of cant. (LBC p. 220-221).

Indeed, he turned out to be right. We still have no idea who he really was; partly he was everything people thought him to be and at the same time not at all. He was doubtlessly complex and contradictory; 'one without has two or three within' (*DJ XVII, 11*) he said and maybe this mystery keeps the interest alive and makes him such a fascinating person to study. Only a highly contradictory and sensitive character could fully comprehend and describe all the facets of falsity, injustice and hypocrisy of the world in and around him, neither prey to its prejudice nor predator without a cause and thus making his poem an evergreen classic of all times for those who are ironic and humble enough to face truth with their own bare face.

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Abbreviations:

- ❖ *CH: Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.*
- ❖ *DJ: Don Juan.*
- ❖ *LBC: Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron.*
- ❖ *Medwin: Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron.*

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