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Byron and *Don Juan*: A Case Study and Queer Reading of the Closeted Libertine

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the major theme of homosexuality throughout the poetry of Lord George Gordon Byron, ultimately focusing on his 1819 iteration of *Don Juan*. It presents historically relevant information regarding the sodomy laws, religious sermons, anti-sodomite publications, and other obstacles that, I argue, prevented Byron from expressing his sexuality openly. The queer Byron, of course, exists elsewhere. Through close readings of Byron's correspondence and of his verse, my thesis argues that we can read Byron's highly coded, homoerotic jargon for what it is, shedding new light on the active but concealed homosexual community of nineteenth-century England.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*With false Ambition what had I to do?
Little with Love, and least of all with Fame;
And yet they came unsought, and with me grew,
And made me all which they can make—a name.
“Epistle to Augusta,” 1830*

In his “Epistle to Augusta,” Byron speaks of being “made” into a “name.” A name, indeed; the mere utterance of “George Gordon Byron” is an incantation of literary magic, invoking with it the infamy of the poet once described by Lady Caroline Lamb—one of his many lovers—as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” Between the poet’s notorious promiscuity and his penchant for dramaticism, Lamb was not alone in her sentiments—to Annabella Milbanke, his wife of a single, tumultuous year, Byron was a “very bad, very good man.” The women of Byron’s life praise, besmirch, and curse his name alike, shaping his public image as a philandering playboy; yet, Byron’s beaux are silent. The narratives of Byron’s male lovers are troublingly evasive, if not absent altogether, revealing an ongoing trend of omission throughout Byron’s biographies. Byron’s “name,” then, is incomplete; the early suppression of Byron’s documented homosexuality, whether through censorship or selective publishing, fosters a false ambiguity untrue to the poet’s sexual identity. Byron’s poetry, letters, and diaries reveal the intensity and desire that Byron felt for his fellow man—although his same-sex trysts were similarly tumultuous, Byron found in men what he sought (to no avail) in women. To deny Byron, a self-

professed “fool of passion,” association with his homosexual relationships is to reduce his name to a mere fragment of the truth. The erasure that Byron encountered in the anti-sodomical eighteenth-century is no longer justifiable in neither the literary nor academic world; instead, armed with that which was once obscured, such as Byron’s private correspondences and the context therein, it is a matter of gay reparation to situate the poet amongst his LGBT+ brethren.

To repair the connection between Byron’s sexuality and his career, placing his texts in conversation with his orientation provides an accessible first step; although I will extend my scholarship to multiple poems of Byron’s throughout my thesis, I will concentrate much of my attention to Byron’s *Don Juan*. After the publication of *Don Juan*, the title character and his copious sexual exploits gained notoriety among not only readers, but also among the public at large, many of whom exalted both its author and main character’s promiscuity to almost mythical proportions. Don Juan’s seemingly immortal status as a literary libertine persists today, allowing the text to be examined under a contemporary – and queer – lens. Whereas the heterosexual nature of Don Juan’s trysts may appear antithetical to a queer reading, the reality is quite to the contrary; Byron weaves a rich web of metaphors, double-entendres, and thin-to-thickly veiled references to male homosexuality throughout *Don Juan*. The concept of “Don Juanism” furthers the possibility of a queer reading.

Before I proceed to the heart of my argument, however, I must first provide some historical context. In chapter two, I will begin by explaining Don Juanism so to establish the lens through which I will examine Byron and *Don Juan*; likewise, I will provide substantial justification for Byron’s “heterosexual performance” by detailing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sodomy laws, as well as the impact these restrictions had on Byron’s authorial voice. A portion of this section will be devoted to examining the theories of Judith Butler, Lévi-Strauss,

and Gayle Rubin and asserting the importance of applying modern queer theory to Byron's poetry, as well as where the concepts of these theorists appear in his biographies.

As I said, I will then direct my focus to Byron himself. The parallel between Byron and his protagonist in *Don Juan* is most prominently shown in their flamboyant sexualities; reading their promiscuity as performative heterosexuality opens the proverbial closet doors to a discussion of concealed queerness not only in the context of *Don Juan*, but in the life of its author as well. Despite Byron's numerous relationships with women, allegations of homosexuality followed him relentlessly throughout his career. Byron's correspondence with his homosexually-inclined peers substantiate his accuser's suspicions, containing explicit—but coded—illustrations of same-sex love, sodomy, and the tumultuous social climate for the British homosexual.

Whereas basing literary criticism upon the author's biography may seem unfashionable, my thesis depends on the uncontroversial argument that Byron's life experiences are inextricably linked to his works; the two must therefore be examined in tandem. Indeed, allowing movement away from a purely textual analysis provides readers with an opportunity to explore Byron beyond his poetry by incorporating what is now known of Byron's life, from his public letters to his private journals, and thereby revealing the profuse intimacy of his works. For example, the connection between Byron's relationships and his poetry may be readily seen in the beginning of the famous—and conspicuously autobiographical—third canto of *Childe Harold*:

Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child!
ADA! sole daughter of my house and heart?
When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled,
And then we parted—not as now we part,

But with a hope.

Awaking with a start,

The waters heave around me; and on high

The winds lift up their voices: I depart,

Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by,

When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye. (3.1-10)¹

Here, Byron directly addresses his then-infant daughter, Ada Lovelace, and proceeds to reference her mother, Lady Anne Byron, before bemoaning the separation brought about by a divorce and his ensuing exile from England. Even prior to and after *Childe Harold*, Byron's works make explicit references to deeply personal experiences, rendering many of them at least semi-autobiographical. The same may be said not only of *Don Juan*, but also of the poetry that I will integrate throughout the second and third chapters of this thesis in relation to Byron's queerness. My research supporting queer interpretations of *Don Juan* and biographical texts on Byron build a foundation substantiating my argument that Byron's experiences with homosexuality shaped *Don Juan*.

CHAPTER 2

DON JUANISM AND THE EARLY ANTI-SODOMITE MOVEMENT

*But all unconscious of the coming doom
The feast, the song, the revel here abounds;
. . . Girt with the silent crimes of capitals,*

¹ All of Byron's works included in this thesis may be found within the same collection: Byron, George Gordon. *Byron: Poetical Works*. Edited by Frederick Page, Oxford University Press, 1970.

Still to the last kind Vice clings to the tottering walls.
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, 1812

I. Don Juanism

Whereas the libertine figure first bore heterosexual connotations—for example, the notion of a hedonistic Bacchus, reveling in wine and women—the increasing persecution of the homosexual in England brought with it a new lens from which to view the womanizer as a “performative heterosexual.” Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender sets the stage upon which this notion of performative sexuality may operate. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler provides an explanation of gender performance that may likewise be applied to its sexual counterpart:

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings that is already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation . . . this “action” is a public action. (140)

Much of Butler’s argument looks to the need for social acceptance and the security of conformity as the cause of performed gender; the act of assimilation is to abide by the “cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality” (17). To operate outside of these implied—or in Byron’s England, literal—laws is to threaten the stability of a system reliant upon gendered roles and the continual reproduction of children to function. Not only is this form of sexuality performative, then, but also obligatory; in *Man, Culture and Society*, Lévi-Strauss defines this cultural dependency as the “division of labor,” or “nothing else than a device to institute a reciprocal state of dependency between the sexes” (79). The society that subscribes to the sexed division of labor spares no space for the homosexual, for a same-sex relationship is

considered antithetical to the integrity of the culture's foundation. Speaking about Lévi-Strauss' claim, Gayle Rubin adds that such ostracization leads to the imminent "suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals" (33). Therefore, much in the way that one's personhood is spared persecution—or even prosecution—when adhering to these gender constraints, so, too, is sexuality perhaps a trait best concealed beneath a heterosexual disguise.

Penalism, however, does not "convert" the homosexual. While many homosexuals resign themselves to courting and coupling outside of society's view, some abstain from same-sex activity entirely. Others take the implications of performative heterosexuality to such a degree that they engage in heterosexual sex acts and conform to their designated gender roles. Butler notes an eccentricity of this behavior in men, through which "disavowed male homosexuality culminates in a heightened or consolidated masculinity" (69). The homosexual man's "overperformance" of heterosexuality results in what has been coined "Don Juanism," named for Byron's hypermasculine, hypersexual literary figure. Jean Pierrot explores this paraphilia in *The Decadent Imagination*, describing Don Juanism as "a physical horror of making love to women uneasily combined with furtive homosexual adventures . . . homosexuality alternately repressed and defiantly proclaimed" (137). Indeed, the heterosexual performance may be acted out by even the homosexual, who may go so far as to assume marital and parental duties while continuing same-sex relationships in secret.

II. Criminalization of Homosexuality in 19th-Century England

Few are my years, and yet I feel

*The World was ne'er design'd for me:
... Truth!—wherefore did thy hated beam
Awake me to a world like this?
"I Would I Were a Careless Child," 1807*

Long before Byron, Don Juanism, and the notion of the closeted libertine, England proved itself an adversary to the homosexual community. Sodomy laws, or laws condemning “modes of sexual intercourse involving the anus or body parts other than the penis or vagina . . . more specifically [referring to] male anal intercourse with another male,” became the most crucial element to controlling “deviant” sexual behavior (Roof 1406). At the behest of King Henry VIII and his Buggery Act, Parliament in 1533 declared homosexuality not only illegal, but also a capital offense. The Buggery Act reads, in part, as follows:

Forasmuch as there is not yet sufficient and condign punishment appointed and limited by the due course of the Laws of this Realm for the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed with mankind . . . the offenders being hereof convicted by verdict, confession or outlawry shall suffer such pains of death and losses and penalties of their good chattels, debts, lands, tenements, and hereditaments as felons do according to the Common Laws of this Realm.

Despite the law’s obvious severity, records detailing the trials and punishments of homosexuals in the sixteenth century are scarce, therefore rendering speculation about England’s earliest sodomy laws just that: speculation. By the eighteenth century, however, England’s crusade against the homosexual is well-documented, especially through the publications of its most zealous supporters. William Blackstone, author of 1765’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, utilized the fervor of the Evangelical Revival to encourage the persecution of the

sodomite by harkening to the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Blackstone points to the “destruction of two cities by fire from heaven,” adding that God’s punishment “is a universal, not merely a provincial, precept . . . our ancient law in some decree imitated this punishment, by commanding such miscreants to be burnt to death” (216). Throughout his writings on this subject, Blackstone bemoans the loss of ancient law and encourages its resurrection. Louis Crompton describes Blackstone’s stance, writing, “Legal tomes still identified burning as the national remedy, citing Leviticus as a sanction for such executions, which were to be carried out early in the morning, apparently to avoid giving too great publicity to so heinous a sin” (14). Additionally, Crompton argues that *Commentaries* deepens societal disdain for the homosexual by never naming sodomy directly, instead deeming the act “peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum”—or, “that horrible crime not to be named among Christians” (217). By refusing to name the alleged sin, Blackstone and his followers seek to not only destroy, but also to *erase* the homosexual, much like their predecessors. Blackstone’s fire-and-brimstone campaign against sodomy gained traction throughout eighteenth-century England, invoking religious hysteria and bringing with it an unprecedented threat against homosexuals in the years to come.

Blackstone’s religious rhetoric was accompanied by a new argument: that homosexuals were a threat to women’s place in society. This “defense” of women appeared not only in legal publications, such as Matthew Bacon’s *New Abridgement of the Law*—within which he lamented that the homosexual was “cursed with insensibility to the most extatic pleasure which human nature is capable of enjoying” (374)—but in literature as well, where homophobia made capital of the erotic novel’s newfound popularity. John Cleland, for instance, positions the titular character of *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* as a mouthpiece for anti-sodomy

laws. After encountering a sex act between two men (to which no detail is spared), Fanny exposes their tryst to the brothel's owner, Mrs. Cole. Fanny paraphrases her response:

Being the common cause of womankind, out of whose mouths this practice tended to take something more than bread, it seemed a peculiar blessing that there was a plaguespot visibly imprinted on all that are tainted with it . . . whose character was stript of all the manly virtues of their own sex, and filled up with only the worst vices and follies of ours . . . of loathing and contemning women, and at the same time apeing all their manners, airs, lisps, scuttle, and, in general, all their little modes of affectation, which become them at least better, than they do these unsexed, male misses. (81)

The "male misses" Cleland describes reference the "Miss Molly" figure: a term used throughout the late eighteenth into the nineteenth century to describe an effeminate homosexual. Whereas the men of *Fanny Hill* find themselves at a heterosexual brothel, similar accommodations were made for homosexuals in the form of the "molly house," or a secret meeting place in which England's gay community could partake in relations while shielded from society's vigilant eye. Predictably, the privacy of the molly houses were quickly compromised, becoming common targets for violent police raids. Mother Clap's, London's most infamous molly house, succumbed to a raid initiated by the Society for the Reformation of Manners; as per Rictor Norton's account, "Forty men were arrested. [Mother Clap] was found guilty of keeping a house for the entertainment of sodomites and put into the pillory . . . Half a dozen of her customers were also put into the pillory, fined, and imprisoned . . . three were hanged for sodomy" (11). Nevertheless, the Society for the Reformation of Manners failed to fully eradicate the establishments that existed long before their formation, nor the homosexuals who frequented them.

Raids of molly houses were not isolated to the late eighteenth-century; even prior to the collapse of Mother Clap's, establishments that catered to homosexuals were commonly besieged by authorities. Norton describes one such instance:

In 1707, a group of at least forty gay men were arrested in London. They were described as a "gang" and frequented a "club" located near the Stock Exchange, and were apparently rounded up as the result of investigations initiated by the Society for Reformation of Manners, the prototypical moral-reform movement which was organized during the closing years of the seventeenth-century. Three of the men killed themselves while being imprisoned. (16)

An anonymous author, inspired by the Society's assault on London's homosexual community, published a moralizing ballad entitled "The Woman Hater's Lamentation" within the same year, 1707. In a move that would inspire the author's successors—such as Cleland in *Fanny Hill*—"The Woman Hater's Lamentation" sought to foster the alleged association between homosexuality, misogyny, and the unnaturalness of same-sex attraction. "The Woman Hater's Lamentation" begins by referencing the aforementioned suicides, of which the author writes, "A new copy of verses on the fatal end of Mr. Grant, a woollen-draper, and two others that cut their throats or hang'd themselves in the Counter; with the discovery of near hundred more that are accused for unnatural dispising the fair sex, and intriguing with one another" ("*Woman-Hater's*", 2). Throughout "The Woman Hater's Lamentation," the death of the homosexual is purported as an inevitable consequence for defying—and defiling—the asserted exclusively heterosexual order of nature. The author addresses an imagined homosexual audience, declaring that "unnat'ral deaths attend / unnat'ral lusts in you" ("*Woman-Hater's*", 27-28); this veiled threat implies that suicide, if not execution or murder, is little more than a consequence of one's sexual

orientation. “The Woman Hater’s Lamentation” purports the innate fault of homosexuals to be, not to be their status as sodomites, but rather their lack of attraction for womankind, construed by the author as hatred. The author writes:

Nature they lay aside,
To gratifie their Lust;
Women they hate beside,
Therefore their Fate was just. (“Woman Hater’s”, 13-16)

Evidently, “The Woman Hater’s Lamentation” serves an inflammatory purpose: by threatening women with irrelevance and thereby provoking their male admirers, the ballad succeeds in illustrating the homosexual as not only a blasphemer, but also as a danger to the integrity of Christian society. The author likens London’s complicity in the harboring of molly houses to the biblical city of Sodom:

A Crime by Men abhor'd,
Nor Heaven can abide
Of which, when Sodom shar'd,
She justly was destroy'd. (“Woman Hater’s”, 29-32)

As defined by the ideology proposed by “The Woman Hater’s Lamentation,” the homosexual was a moral blight upon Britain in dire need of purging, be it through imprisonment, execution, or otherwise; should the unnatural remain in the Christian heterosexual’s society, London was surely to succumb to divine retribution. “The Woman Hater’s Lamentation” set a particularly dangerous precedent by intertwining the fates of the homosexuals and heterosexuals of London, making homosexuality a community-wide concern.

The heralding of the nineteenth-century brought with it not only the continuation of the homophobia made clear in Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, but also an

uptick in violent anti-homosexual rhetoric and increased sanctions against sodomy. A.D. Harvey provides a summary of the era's aggressive approach to homosexuality:

During the first thirty-five years of the nineteenth century more than fifty men were hanged for sodomy in England . . . in one year, 1806, there were more executions for sodomy than for murder. It was the case that in the first third of the nineteenth century, trials and executions for sodomy were much commoner than they had been in any earlier period. (939)

Crompton supplements Harvey's statistics, adding, "During the period of 1805-1815, when the annual number of executions for all crimes dropped . . . sodomy was the only crime for which the number of hangings remained more or less constant" (38). Crompton's statistics coincide with the reinstatement of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, formerly known as the Society for the Reformation of Manners in the early eighteenth century. The Society's 1694 publication *Proposals for a National Reformation of Manners* assembled the dogmatic framework later employed by Blackstone and others. Crompton writes, "The anonymous writer plays on popular fears: tremors had been felt in London, and these are interpreted as divine protests against 'profane' conduct" (58). Indeed, at the height of the Society's first incarnation, member Reverend Thomas Bray adopted *Proposals'* methodology in his notoriously vitriolic sermons. Andrew Craig provides a historical exposition on Bray's "For God, or for Satan: Being a Sermon Preached at Saint Mary le Bow, Before the Society for the Reformation of Manners":

In condemning homosexuality, Bray and the reformers of manners were being consistent with their earlier providential interpretation of the link between the nation's sound manners and its continued enjoyment of divine favours. If the campaign slackened, then "God will pour down a deluge of wrath upon us, so as totally to devour

both us and ours, and that will cost us our all” . . . Sodomy, he declared, was worse than all other forms of uncleanness and God had singled it out for special condemnation. (100)

Whereas the Society for the Reformation of Manners began with a crusade-like fervor, the public took so poorly to the proposed purging of popular entertainment venues—such as pubs and whorehouses—that the Society crumbled in 1738. In 1802, the aforementioned Society for the Suppression of Vice arose with a newfound vigor. The new Society established an age in which “hangings of homosexuals increased in number and became more or less annual events” (Craig 62). The resurrected Society was not only prepared but eager to sustain its assault against the homosexuals of England throughout the new century.

England’s criminalization of homosexuality was a turbulent, extensive process comprised of both individual and collective figureheads; much like the hydra of Greek mythos, the elimination of one anti-sodomite movement would foster another in its place. Indeed, the seeming omnipresence of homophobia and portrayal of the homosexual as a threat to Britain succeeded in not only alienating centuries of gay individuals from their country, but also stoked the flames of a violent crusade against the homosexual identity. To be homosexual was to imperil the integrity and safety of British society; to harbor a homosexual was to betray the Puritanical values that many anti-sodomites credited with the success of Britain. Hal Gladfelder speaks to this antithetical identity in *Criminality and Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England: Beyond the Law*:

Ultimately, the sodomite is quite visibly marked as ineradicably other . . . in a 1752 fulmination from the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, for instance, the author explicitly sets the sodomite in opposition to the Briton: ‘A love of our species, and the preservation of it;

a love of our country, and the preventing of the most dreadful plagues which this sin threatens, should determine all Britons to do their utmost to expose and bring to condign punishment the Sodomite. This is the work of the Lord, to take away the sodomites from the land.’ (12)

Through the vitriol of men such as King Henry VII, William Blackstone, John Cleland, Reverend Thomas Bray, and those who comprised the Societies, Britain became a nation preoccupied with homosexuality and the eradication thereof. The homosexual’s means to evade the scrutinous lens of moral reformers were scarce, often limited to resigning oneself to performative heterosexuality or to immigrating to countries free of sodomy laws; in either case, respite from persecution required a rejection and betrayal of the self.

Although rhetoric pardoning homosexuality—much less condoning it—proved sparse throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, Byron himself may have contributed to the voices in favor of tolerance. After Byron’s death, a poem entitled *Don Leon*—penned in his name, no less—surfaced, arguing for the improved treatment of homosexuals and including intimate details of the poet’s same-sex relationships. Despite ongoing arguments regarding the true author of *Don Leon*, many have embraced the poem as Byron’s due to its alleged discovery in his private journals post-mortem. The mistaken attribution, if it is indeed mistaken, is interesting in and of itself because it speaks to how much Byron is associated with the affirmation of homosexuality in his life and thereafter. Nevertheless, I will henceforth refer to the *Don Leon* author as Byron, due in no small part to the uncanny similarities between the prose and experiences of Byron and his potential appropriator. In the opening stanza of *Don Leon*, Byron illustrates a homosexual figure as a corpse in the gallows—as Blackstone, among others, would have him—and asserts the man’s innocence to an unnamed judge:

Thou ermined judge, pull off that sable cap!

. . .

Peep thro' the casement; see the gallows there:

Thy work hands on it; could not mercy spare?

. . .

He stopped no lonely traveller on the road;

He burst no lock, he plundered no abode;

He never wrong'd the orphan of his own;

He stifled not the ravish'd maiden's groan.

Till thou did'st send thy myrmidons to prowl,

And watch the pricklings of his morbid lust,

To wring his neck and call thy doings just. ("Don Leon", 1, 3-4, 11,18)

The poem brazenly disputes the criminalization of sodomy by placing the consensual sexual act against several "real" crimes—robbery, vandalism, and rape—and dismisses both England's religious and legal authorities as mere "myrmidons," or mythological, mindless "ant-men." The argument here is as thorough as it is impassioned; the speaker not only pleads for the "poor misogynist" caught in the crosshairs of *Fanny Hill* and "The Woman-Hater's Lamentation" (76), but also extends his ire to the press who "insult his ghost / with sainted columns in the *Morning Post*" (79-80). *Don Leon* contains startlingly specific references to Byron's soon-to-be-discussed private affairs as well, from his first trysts with "Rushton . . . who made [Byron's] eyes delight" to the "pleasing lineaments named Edleston" ("Don Leon", 171-172, 212). Whereas the poem is indeed riddled with references to Byron's homosexuality—and is, at times, outright pornographic—the author scarcely strays far from his primary demands: the abolition of hanging as a punishment for sodomy and a complete reform of laws regulating sexuality. Crompton testifies to the enduring relevance of *Don Leon*, affirming that the author, however dubious in authenticity, "wrote, in a form that is telling and powerful, the earliest published protest against

homosexual oppression in England that has survived and the first plea for understanding” (361). *Don Leon*’s appeal, however, did little to deter the course of the anti-sodomite movement; England continued to enforce sodomy laws to varying degrees until 1967, nearly a century after the poem’s publication.

The illegality surrounding sodomy and homosexuality haunted Byron throughout much of his life. Nonetheless, he was rarely deterred from acting on his desires; through secret liaisons, coded letters, and careful maneuvering within the world’s many queer communities, his encounters with the law were few and far between. However, despite his proclivity for “mad, bad, and dangerous” behavior, Byron’s psyche was not unscathed by the influence of Blackstone and his peers. Crompton writes, “Byron, for all his flippancy, seems to have felt considerable guilt about most aspects of his sexual activity” and that his “bisexuality was the reason for his many anxieties” (121, 124). His myriad relationships with high-status, sometimes foreign men provided him with some measure of protection but still did not quell the internalized self-loathing that sodomy laws and anti-sodomite rhetoric wrought among the homosexual population of England. Perhaps due in part to such emotional strife, Byron’s sexual affairs—homosexual and heterosexual alike—were particularly tumultuous, commonly existing in parallel with one another, and occasionally clashing.

CHAPTER 3

BYRON’S BIOGRAPHICAL BUGGERY

I. Mary and Misogyny

*“Our Lord Byron—the fascinating, faulty, childish, philosophical being—daring the world . . .
impetuous and indolent, gloomy, and yet more gay than any other!”*

Mary Shelley to John Murray, 19 January 1830 (McClay 211)

Byron was born in London in January 1788 upon the drawing room floor of a rented apartment. As the sole child of an ill-fated union between a young Scottish heiress, Catherine Gordon, and Captain John Byron—or “Mad Jack”—of the Coldstream guards, Byron was promptly steeped within romantic unorthodoxy. In *Byron: Life and Legend*, Fiona McCarthy describes the impact of John Byron’s early presence in his son’s life:

Byron’s father . . . has his own role in the Byron legend where he figures a dashing but wholly reprehensible confidence trickster . . . but John Byron was also a figure of some pathos, a social inadequate terrified of loneliness, with the dangerous lust for liaison, however unsuitable, that descended to his son. (5)

Indeed, young Byron, often known as “that little deevil [sic] Geordie” throughout his childhood home of Aberdeen, seemed to inherit his father’s vices. Here, Byron began to hone his penchant for romantic and sexual exploits, notably with his earliest known flame, Mary Duff, of whom he spoke fondly into adulthood. McCarthy, noting Byron’s notorious sexual curiosity and fairytale-like embellishment of their courtship, posits that his musings on Mary speak volumes as to their true relationship, writing:

Byron displays his talent for concealing his early, less idyllic heterosexual experiences . . . His close and candid friend John Hobhouse was caustic about Byron's ingenuous account of awakening passion in Aberdeen: "With respect to the early development of these propensities in Byron, I am acquainted with a singular fact scarcely fit for narration but much *less* romantic and *more* satisfactory than the amour with Mary Duff. (11)

Byron's relationships with women would prove not only turbulent, but also less passionate than those with men; this discrepancy may be seen in many of his correspondences with his female companions, be they fleeting flings, wives, or ex-partners. At times, Byron's sentiments towards women were blatantly misogynistic, such as those referred to in his 1812 letter to Francis Hodgson: "I have one request to make," Byron asserts, "which is, never to mention a woman again in any letter to me, or even allude to the existence of the sex. I won't even read a word of the feminine gender—it must all be *propria quae maribus* [only of the masculine gender]" (Marchand 163). In a similarly troubling letter to Lady Elizabeth Lamb—the Viscountess Melbourne—Byron professes, "I have no 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" (Marchand 208). For what it's worth, Byron's frequent exaltation of women in his poetry contradicts his disparaging private letters, where he appears to have trusted his companions to the extent that he not only shared with them his distaste of women, but also his fondness for men.

Whereas Byron's emotions with respect to women would run wild and his temper rampant, a disconnect with female physicality would also plague his heterosexual relationships. MacCarthy adds, "Byron found a woman a complicated structure . . . He preferred the physique of young teenage boys, or girls dressed as boys that became a feature of his early days in

London” (24). Byron professed his love for boyish beauty even into adulthood; one of many examples may be found in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, where he muses on an unnamed youth: “Love has no gift so grateful as his wings: / How fair, how young, how soft soe’er he seem / Full from the fount of joy’s delicious streams” (I.LXXXII). An unnamed stanza from Byron’s thirties portrays a similar preoccupation with youth, and perhaps the tumultuous relationships had with many boys far younger than himself:

The winged boy, Love
Is but for boys—
You’ll find it torture
Though sharper, shorter,
To wean, and not wear out your joys. (1-5)

By the stanza’s publication in 1819, Byron had a notoriously lengthy string of failed homosexual relationships behind him—nearly all of which were with boys younger than himself, sometimes scandalously so. Here it may be inferred that Byron, frustrated with his aging body, no longer fancied himself a “boy” like those he courted. Nevertheless, Byron inarguably claimed his fill of youth throughout his life, from his own boyhood romances to his later infatuation with the young and beautiful.

II. Byron’s Englishmen

*I can reduce all feelings but this one;
And that I would not; for at length I see
Such scenes as those wherein my life begun,
The earliest—even the only paths for me—
Had I but sooner learnt the crowd to shun,
I had been better than I now can be;*

*The passions which have torn me would have slept;
I had not suffer'd, and thou hadst not wept.
"Epistle to Augusta," 1830*

As the alleged first of Byron's homosexual relationships, his precarious tryst with Lord Grey de Ruthyn—a tenant of Newstead Abbey, where Byron lived as a teen—unknowingly established the dynamics of Byron's most coveted romances: a man pursuing, a boy pursued. Grey was, notably, twenty-three years old to Byron's fifteen. Throughout his time at Newstead, Grey served as Byron's tutor, confidant, and constant companion during the winter of 1803; unlike many of Byron's later relationships, however, it is the parting—not the courting—that makes his tryst with Grey so remarkable. In an 1804 letter to his cousin, Augusta, Byron laments his mother's insistence that he mend the abruptly broken bond between he and Grey; Byron writes, "She wishes me to explain my reasons for disliking him, which I will never do, would I do it to any one, be assured you my dear Augusta would be the first who would know them, but they will ever remain hidden in my own breast" (Marchand 54). It was not only Byron and Grey who were mum; Hobhouse—a close friend of Byron's—later wrote of the affair, claiming that a "circumstance occurred during this intimacy which certainly had much effect on [Byron's] future morals" (Marchand 80). The unspeakability of Grey's transgression harkens to Blackstone's "horrible crime not to be named," likely implicating the two in mutual—if not one-sided—homosexual interest, of which Byron either recanted or spurned. Eisler further posits,

Lord Grey had made sexual advances to Byron that the younger boy repulsed, or wished he had . . . Whether Byron knew of [sodomy laws] and their victims' fate, he would certainly have been aware of the criminal significance of sexual relations between men. It is in this atmosphere of terror that the hysterical tone of Byron's

fulminations against Lord Grey . . . along with his refusal to specify the nature of his host's heinous acts must be seen. The intensity of his fear, moreover, points to an earlier complicity, followed by a guilty need to exonerate himself. (72-73)

Whereas Byron's schoolboy promiscuity had been mere gossip, talk of his very public parting with Lord Grey appears to have circulated widely amongst his social circle, substantiated by his frantic attempts to quell the speculation. Although the details of their parting were never revealed to the public, Byron's altercation with Grey was his first taste of the danger surrounding homosexual relationships in England—a danger that Byron, nevertheless, courted throughout the remainder of his life upon leaving Newstead.

Byron's clandestine relationship with the young John Edleston, a Trinity College chorister, imbued his time at Cambridge with a romance so passionate that Byron repeatedly attempted to recreate it thereafter. MacCarthy asserts that Edleston, who would later inspire Byron's "Thyrza" poems, aided the troubled poet in "reclaiming the idealism lost in the mindless drinking and whoring of his early Cambridge weeks" (58). Though he empathized with Edleston's plight as a fellow orphan, Byron appears to have fashioned their relationship with what MacCarthy deems "*de haut en bas*"—a French term for "from above to below," through which the young men's class disparity became a source of "sexual frisson" (59); their patron-protege bond was notably erotic.

Amid their boyish love, Byron found in Edleston a sentimentality that had long eluded him since his early youth. Indeed, Edleston himself inspired Byron's short poem "The Cornelian," in which Byron illustrates the gift given to him by Edleston in 1806 at the end of his first year at Cambridge: a "gold ring mounted with a gleaming pale pink stone in the shape of a heart" (MacCarthy 60). Edleston, anxious that Byron would refuse the ring due to the common

gemstone's modest cost, "burst into tears . . . this in turn melted Byron, who shed tears of his own" (Crompton 99). Recalling the event in "The Cornelian," Byron writes:

No specious splendour of this stone,
Endears it to my memory ever;
With lustre only once it shone,
and blushes modest as the giver.
.
.
.
This pledge attentively I view'd,
And sparkling as I held it near,
Methought one drop of the stone bedew'd,
And ever since I've lov'd a tear. (53, 1-4, 13-16)

Thereafter, Byron often referred to Edleston as "The Hero of My Cornelian" in his correspondences. Byron again references Edleston's gift in "The Adieu," where he professes, "Still near my breast thy gift I wear / Which sparkled once with feeling's tear / Of love the pure, the sacred gem" (65-67). Although Byron later regifted the cornelian to a close friend, Elizabeth Pigot, he requested that it be returned to him after Edleston's abrupt death, eager to reacquire the last worldly remnant of his former lover.

Byron's adulthood—not infidelity nor scandal—brought with it the end of Byron and Edleston's romance. Edleston was no longer the "gentle, almost girlish fifteen-year-old" of the Trinity College choir; now a young adult and in dire need of income, Edleston acquired a "lowly clerkship in the South Sea House" (MacCarthy 58), starkly contrasting Byron's prior promises of patron-and-protege pursuits (Eisler 128). Devastated but unable to prevent their separation, Byron proposed an impermanent parting that would later be remedied by either purchasing a business partnership for Edleston or simply by cohabiting with him upon his return from the South Sea House. Speaking to the damned nature of their relationship, Eisler states:

The choice offered to Edleston in this grandiose scenario—being kept by Byron or having his lover purchase a partnership for him—is poignant in its naivete. Byron was trying to salvage both his conscience and dull their shared pain by limning a fantasy of the future, when his wealth would allow them to transcend the criminal consequences of their love and live openly together. (128)

As the months passed, the interactions between Edleston and Byron cooled to what appears to be one based on little more than financial transactions made to ease Edleston's economic struggles. Eisler posits that this was an intentional outcome on Byron's behalf, for "his relations with men, until this point, could be rationalized into familial models: schoolboy brothers or working-class sons . . . when passion threatened these categories, Byron knew it was time to flee" (172). The two men's final correspondence was a letter in which Edleston again sought Byron's patronage; Byron never responded.

While abroad in 1810, Byron received news that Edleston had been apprehended and accused of "indecent" in England. Although Byron no longer spoke nor wrote to his former flame, the potential of disastrous—if not deadly—consequences loomed for both. Byron's past intimacy with Edleston not only bound their names to one another, perhaps implicating Byron as a participant in Edleston's "indecent," but also became a secret dangerously close to being unearthed. Byron appears to have simply evaded the scandal by extending his stay in Athens until Edleston was no longer a subject of public scrutiny. In defense of Byron's inaction regarding Edleston's troubles with the metropolitan police, Crompton posits, "The thought that any exertion on Edleston's behalf would in turn have made Byron himself liable to more suspicion must have tortured him: this is a common dilemma homosexuals and bisexuals faced when their friends were in trouble" (144). Nevertheless, Edleston's abrupt reappearance in

Byron's life stoked a still-pining flame within the poet that would later become a source of solemn inspiration for his *Thyrza* poems.

Upon returning to England in the autumn of 1811, Byron discovered that Edleston had met an untimely death during his absence. While perusing his bounty of unread letters, Byron learned through Edleston's sister that he had died of consumption several months prior at the age of twenty-one. Byron's response, predictably, was one of great tumult; he drank copiously, mourned deeply, and penned a plethora of letters and elegies which he circulated throughout his peers. In a letter to Hodgson, Byron expresses how the estrangement between himself and Edleston complicated his grief:

I heard of a death the other day that shocked me more than any of the preceding, of one whom I once loved more than I ever loved a living thing, & one who I believe loved me to the last, yet I had not a tear left for an event which five years ago would have bowed me to the dust; still it sits heavy on my heart & calls back what I wish to forget, in many a feverish dream. (Marchand 110)

Byron, who while at sea still "fantasize[d] an earthly reunion" with Edleston, "had allowed himself to do so . . . even as the boy was buried in the crypt of Great St. Mary's Church in Cambridge" (Eisler 303). Indeed, unbeknownst to Byron, Edleston was little more than a memorialized plaque while he pondered their potential reconciliation. Whereas Edleston's friends and family had long mourned and recovered from the shock of his death, Byron—now isolating himself in the confines of his London home—had only his pen and a select few companions with whom he could share his turmoil. "When We Two Parted" strikes a mournful chord, poignantly phrasing Byron's predicament:

They name thee before me,
A knell to mine ear;
A shudder comes o'er me—
Why wert thou so dear?

They know not I knew thee,
Who knew thee too well—
Long, long shall I rue thee,
Too deeply to tell. (17-24)

Truly, Byron's "they"—British society at large—would never know how deeply the bond between he and Edleston once was. As a result of the still-strict anti-sodomite laws and the lingering presence of moral reform movements throughout England, Byron found himself robbed of the opportunity to openly grieve the loss of Edleston without risking retaliation. Instead, Byron wielded his memories of Edleston as a muse—a pervasive phantom—thereby immortalizing the "hero of his Cornelian" in a series of poems used to speak the unspeakable.

It is at this time that Byron began to compose his aforementioned "Thyrza poems," all of which were completed within a year of learning about Edleston's death. In the first poem, simply titled "To Thyrza," Byron laments the metaphorical nail in the coffin of their reunion:

By many a shore and many a sea
Divided, yet beloved in vain;
The Past, the Future fled to thee,
To bid us meet—no—ne'er again!
Could this have been—a word, a look,
That softly said, "We part in peace." (5-10)

Byron then proceeds to speak of the "whisper'd thought of hearts allied" (31), establishing the recurring imagery of hearts throughout the Thyrza poems. Whereas Byron's affinity for hearts is indeed a tradition of the elegiac form, Edleston's gift—the cornelian heart—influences many of

these instances. In a tellingly-titled poem, “On a Cornelian Heart Which Was Broken,” Byron regards the “ill-fated” cornelian heart to be synonymous with his own, writing:

Yet precious seems each shatter'd part
And every fragment dearer grown
Since he who wears thee feels thou art
A fitter emblem of his own. (5-8)

As attached as Byron was to the trinket, however, never once among the Thyrza poems does he name Edleston as the source of his grief; even in his letters, like those to Hodgson and other companions, Byron rarely discloses Edleston’s identity. Instead, Byron relegates Edleston to vague epithets such as the prior “one whom I once loved” and the “Giver of That Cornelian” (Marchand 110, 120). The same homophobic forces that intimidated Byron into extending his stay in Greece during Edleston’s apprehension appear to have likewise cornered the poet into maintaining a distance between himself and his former lover, even in mourning. Byron goes so far as to refer to Thyrza with feminine pronouns in certain poems; the female Thyrza appears in “One Struggle More, And I Am Free,” where Byron exclaims, “Now Thyrza gazes on that moon / Alas, it gleam’d upon **her** grave!” (31-32) Crompton provides additional context for Byron’s obfuscation of Edleston in name and gender alike, noting, “Edleston’s clouded reputation would in itself have made it difficult for Byron to address him directly in any dedication. He could of course have indicated he was writing about a man without identifying him, but no doubt he felt it would be easier to be evasive about a woman” (188). Despite the immense influence that Edleston had on Byron’s poetry and the course of his life, their relationship ended just as it began: in secrecy.

Byron became increasingly estranged from England after Edleston’s death, perhaps exacerbated by returning to a world of sexual stealth, sodomy laws, and homophobia after

encountering acceptance abroad. Shortly thereafter, Byron developed a system of duplicity in which he relented to heteronormative pressures while in England—going so far as to court, marry, and separate from numerous high-profile women—and sated his homosexual desires beyond the border. MacCarthy asserts that the denial of his homosexual urges was not without consequence, stating, “Between 1811 and 1816 . . . his friendships with younger men were to be muted. Conversely, his attentions to women were to be frenetic over these five years, with an element of cruelty engendered by the knowledge that he was being false to his own heart” (147). Alienated and aware that his sexual identity was wholly incompatible with England’s religious and political standing, Byron relied on travel to escape not only his heterosexual obligations and ongoing suspicion, but also his troubled past with the men of England.

III. The Boys of Byron’s Travels

*In flight I shall be surely wise,
Escaping from temptation’s snare:
I cannot view my Paradise
Without the wish of dwelling there.*

“On Being Asked My Reason for Quitting England in the Spring,” 1808

Falmouth—a small port town to the southwest of Cornwall, England—served as a proverbial springboard for Byron’s frequent seafaring. Whereas Byron engaged in many homosexual exploits, it is here in Cornwall that he established a pattern of libertinism that he

would pursue abroad. In a letter to Charles Skinner Matthews, a friend and fellow homosexual, Byron describes the rich queer culture to be found in Falmouth: “We are surrounded by Hyacinths & other flowers of the most fragrant nature, & I have some intention of culling a handsome Bouquet to compare with the exotics I hope to meet in Asia” [Moore 76]. Byron’s coded language alludes to “the beautiful Laconian youth loved by Apollo who, killed accidentally in a game of quoits, was changed into a flower” (McCarthy 90); Byron’s “bouquet” refers to the multitude of male lovers he hoped to indulge throughout his Grand Tour. Similarly, Byron makes several mentions of the “incitements to the *Plen. and optabil—coit.* the port of Falmouth” (Crompton 128) described by McCarthy as “a corruption of the phrase in Petronius’ Satyricon ‘coitum plenum et optabilem’—as much full intercourse as one could wish for . . . [and] the overcoming of an uninitiated boy’s reluctance” (91). Matthew’s response to Byron is duly explicit despite its encryption:

As to your Botanical pursuits, I take it that the flowers you will be most desirous of culling will be of the class polyandria and not monogynia but *nogynia*. However so as you do not cut them it will all do very well . . . If you should find anything remarkable in the botanical line, pray send me word of it, who takes an extreme interest in your anthology; and specify the class and if possible the name of each production. (Moore 76)

Matthews builds upon Byron’s botanical language by allegorizing the male genitalia and the stamen of polyandrous flowers—“*nogynia*,” similarly, plays upon the Greek “gyn” to indicate an absence of female genitals. Matthews also makes a multitude of references to his own “botanical studies” and the many “specimens” he encountered during his correspondence with Byron, indicating a collaborative catalogue of promiscuity shared between the two. In the midst of

pagan, naturalist imagery, we can also glimpse a single Christian element in Byron's coding by the means of Methodism; Byron adopted and bastardized the term with seeming glee, believed by Neff to be an "ironic swipe at the rather strict moral code espoused by that sect" (408).

Matthews writes again to Byron, explaining:

I positively decree that every one who professes *ma methode* do spell the term which designates his calling with an "e" at the end of it—methodiste, not methodist, and pronounce the word in French fashion. Every one's taste must revolt at confounding ourselves with that sect of horrible, snivelling fanatics. (Moore 77)

Matthew's "methodistes," then, may be understood as disciples of "the orthodox notion of a libertine, a man for whom a boy could serve as a sexual partner as readily as a woman, provided that the boys and women in question were passive partners in such sexual relations" (Neff 408). The sex that Byron, Matthews, and their queer companions sought during his Grand Tour was notably heteronormative in role—themselves as the penetrative males, and their "hyacinths" as the receiving females—thereby intertwining the sodomical with the religious, and the homosexual with the heterosexual. Indeed, Byron and his companions compiled an intricate language—an "effective cloak of invisibility" (Neff 414)—to obscure their homosexual exploits. Byron was, therefore, able to proceed in his Grand Tour and seize the "feast of boy love" that awaited him overseas without suspicion (Eisler 178).

Several of Byron's homosexual encounters during his Grand Tour stand out. For instance, Neff writes of Byron's numerous trips to "buggery shops," where "Turks would have sex with Jewish and Greek yemakis, or dancing boys" (408-409). Byron's traveling companion, Hobhouse, wrote in his journals that the yemakis' performance was so explicit that "no Englishman would patiently contemplate for a moment" (Eisler 263). The Turkish baths,

likewise, were described by Byron as “marble palace[s] of sherbet and sodomy” (Crompton 142). During this phase of the trip, Byron went so far as to protect himself from allegations of homosexuality that he sent his page, Robert Rushton, back home to England. Eisler notes, “Turkish and Greek acceptance of homosexuality was well known; with his intention to cull as many ‘hyacinths’ as possible in the east . . . and indulge himself with local boys, Byron was in no position to protect his page” (199). Whereas Byron’s decision may have been made in part to protect Rushton and himself from rumors regarding their ongoing “shipboard intimacy” amongst his heterosexual traveling companions, Byron’s letter to Rushton’s family—in which Byron crossed out a phrase stating, “you know *boys* are not *safe* amongst the Turks” (Eisler 200)—may indicate that Byron simply did not wish to share his page with others. Byron, however, was more than willing to share himself.

Upon reaching Greece, Byron’s homosexual conquests showed no signs of stopping; he boasted “above two hundred pl & opt Cs”—again, referencing sodomy in the *Satyricon*—in a letter to Hobhouse during his travels (Marchand 68). While many of his Greek encounters remained anonymous, three of Byron’s suitors proved to be recurring figures throughout his conversations and poetry alike: Nicolo Giraud, Eustathius Georgiou, and Lukas Chalandrutsanos. Keeping with Byron’s well-established penchant for the young and the beautiful, the three boys were youthful, gregarious, and keen to spend time with a famous poet and rising hero of Greece.

During Byron’s stay at a Capuchin monastery in Athens, he found himself beneath the linguistic tutelage of fifteen-year-old Nicolo Giraud, whom Byron had solicited to learn Italian. As inferred from Byron’s first mention of Giraud in a letter to Hobhouse, Byron’s usual role as the pursuer was usurped by the passionate youth who promptly swore himself to the poet’s side. Byron writes:

But my friend you may imagine is Nicolo, who by the bye, is my Italian master, and we are already very philosophical. I am his “Padrone” and his “amico” and the Lord knows what besides, it is about two hours since that after informing me he was most desirous to follow *him* (that is me) over the world, he concluded by telling me it was proper for us not only to live but “morire insieme” [die together]—the latter I hope to avoid, as much of the former as he pleases. (Marchand 12)

Byron, at the time, appeared to have no qualms with Giraud’s intensity and the two quickly entered a mutually amorous relationship. In another letter to Hobhouse, Byron likens his new companion to the mythological Lycus, who was “nigris oculis, nigroque Crine decorum [beautiful for black eyes and raven locks]” (Marchand 14). Additionally, the author of *Don Leon* provides several verses as to Byron’s attraction to Giraud, “whose beauty would unlock / the gates of prejudice” and with whom “the wish, long cherished, long denied / Within that monkish cell was gratified” (“Leon”, 678-79, 684-85). Contrarily, Byron’s sexual relationship with Giraud appears to have been lukewarm despite his poetics; Byron confided his still-unfulfilled to “pl & opt C” to Hobhouse, assuring his friend that his “progress is rapid, but like Caesar, *nil actum reputans dum quid superesset agendum* [always prompt to act, believed nothing had been done while anything was left to be done]” (Marchand 14)—perhaps implying that he and Giraud had done everything *but*. Whether or not the lack of “as much full intercourse as one may wish for” contributed to the end of Byron and Giraud’s relationship is uncertain; regardless, Byron stopped responding to Giraud’s pining letters upon returning to England.

Eustathius Georgiou, similarly, spent only a short time as Byron’s chosen darling. Byron poetically illustrates his first encounter with Georgiou in Vostitza, where he “found the dear soul upon horseback clothed very sprucely in Greek garments, with those ambrosial curls hanging

down his amiable back [and] a parasol in his hand to save his complexion from the heat”

(Marchand 6). Eisler provides additional commentary on Georgiou’s unconventional mannerisms towards Byron:

Eustathius Georgiou was a foot-stamping beauty who was well aware that his girlish good looks made him a prized commodity in the sexual marketplace; he carried a parasol to shield his complexion from the sun and was clever (and probably experienced) enough to play his English pursuer, amorous one day and rejecting all overtures the next. (233)

Indeed, Byron often found himself outplayed by the cunning teen, confessing that “never in [his] life had [he taken] so much pain to please, or succeeded so ill” (Marchand 6). As Eisler implies, Byron was not the only apple of Georgiou’s eye; his popularity ensured that where Byron failed, another would succeed, whether in gifts, sex, or simple adoration. Within a short time, the two wore on one another to such an extent that Byron returned Georgiou to his father by ship, retreating to England with only his platonic companions in tow.

Lukas Chalandrutsanos, Byron’s last romantic interest prior to his death, imbued the poet’s later works with the melancholy of unrequited love. By the 1820s, Byron had become such a respected figure in Grecian politics that he returned to the islands indefinitely; during this time, Byron used his wealth to not only bolster Greece’s attempt at independence in the Ottoman Wars, but also extended his finances for charitable purposes. Byron found himself the primary supporter of the Chalandrutsanos family, thereby caring for a widow and her four children—one of whom was fifteen-year-old Lukas, whom he brought on as a page and thereby filled the position long vacated by Rushton. Byron, it seems, expected a sexual relationship with Chalandrutsanos akin to the one that he’d had with Rushton; the young warrior-to-be, however,

spurned Byron's myriad advances. Eisler explains, "Lukas had made it clear, in his artless way, that he cared only for the gold helmets and silver-gilt sabers and money he demanded—and was given—but nothing for the man who gave them" (739). Devastated, Byron entered a state of emotional turmoil that culminated in a series of poems both about and directed to Chalandrutsanos: "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year," "Last Words on Greece," and "Love and Death." Byron appears to have blamed Chalandrutsanos' rejection on his age in particular, as exhibited in the first and second stanzas of "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year":

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love!

My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of Love are gone;
The worm—the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone! (1-8)

Byron's resentment that he had grown too old for boyish romance was surely exacerbated by his preference for youths; aside from Ruthyn, who sought Byron to perhaps sate a similar taste, Byron is not known to have ever taken a male lover older than himself. Byron's verses on aging pair well with those of "Last Words on Greece," where he anguishes, "I am a fool of passion, and a frown / Of thine to me is an adder's eye . . . Such is this maddening fascination grown / So strong thy magic or so weak am I" (5-6, 9-10). For all intents and purposes, Byron's infatuation with Chalandrutsanos appears to have been fostered by his page's adamant disinterest—an unfamiliar concept to the promiscuous poet, who had even succeeded in retaining the otherwise

fickle Eustathius's attentions through lavish gifts. No evidence indicates that Byron ever harbored resentment for Chalandrutsanos, nor that his desire ever ebbed—his adoration only ceased in death. "Love and Death" was not only dedicated to Chalandrutsanos, but was also written in 1824 - the year of Byron's death - as he succumbed to his own ailing health. Of Chalandrutsanos, Byron writes:

And when convulsive throes denied my breath
The faintest utterance to my fading thought,
To thee—to thee—e'en in the gasp of death
My spirit turned, oh! oftener than it ought.

Thus much and more; and yet thou lov'st me not,
And never wilt! Love dwells not in our will.
Nor can I blame thee, though it be my lot
To strongly, wrongly, vainly love thee still. (17-24)

Although Chalandrutsanos was present for the first few of Byron's many seizures—his "convulsive throes"—Byron soon died without the company of his beloved page, having sent him away to "spare him the sight of bloody bandages and possible death agony" (Crompton 334). Nevertheless, Crompton adds that "at least one commemorative statue to Byron in Greece shows him expiring in the arms of his Greek page" (335). There is a cruel, undeniable irony to be had had that led Byron to die in the midst of unrequited love in Greece, where such a relationship was—for the most part—socially permissible.

As evidenced by the plethora of poems and letters entangled within the nexus of Byron's homosexual relationships, it is clear that Byron's sexuality is inextricable from his work. From the criminalization of same-sex love to persecution and the pillory, England's abuse of the

homosexual community plagued Byron's short life in myriad aspects, creating a tension immediately seen in his poetry when provided with the context of its creation. In true Grecophile fashion, Byron's art imitates his life in a most Aristotelian manner; to know Byron is to know his poetry, enabling readers to decipher the meticulously obscured truths of his sexuality and relationships.

CHAPTER 4

“ONE HALF OF WHAT I SHOULD SAY”: QUEERING BYRON'S *DON JUAN*

*Thus would he while his lonely hours away
Dissatisfied, nor knowing what he wanted;
Nor glowing reverie, nor poet's lay,
Could yield his spirit that for which it panted,
A bosom whereon he his head might lay,
And hear the heart beat with the love it granted
With—several other things, which I forget,
Or which, at least, I need not mention yet.*

Don Juan, 1819

Much like its predecessors, Byron's 1819 iteration of *Don Juan* functions as an indulgently heteronormative text; prior to Byron's take on the literary libertine, Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* had long asserted the character of Don Juan as a philandering, seductive pillar of masculine sexuality. These early Don Juans indulged in exclusively heterosexual liaisons and assumed their expected gender roles, acting as

the pursuer and exhibiting sexually dominant, aggressive behavior. Although these previous tales indeed glorified the titular characters' sexual conquests to a certain extent, their conclusions were often more befitting of a morality tale; for instance, Molina's Don Juan is struck dead after dining upon vipers and scorpions in a show of machismo, while Mozart's is delivered to the bowels of hell upon the backs of a demonic legion. Whereas the final cantos of Byron's *Don Juan* were left unfinished at his death, it may be assumed that Byron intended to break the canonical mold of the Don Juans before him; notably, Byron's Don Juan is the passive object of female sexual desire. Eisler writes:

Deconstructing the figure of the sinister seducer, Byron's "Donny Johnny" is a proto-hero so innocent, uninformed, and passive that his very name becomes a running joke. This Don Juan is no Casanova, he's Candide. Even the pronunciation of his name is enlisted to keep the reader off-balance: "Ju-an" rhymes—appropriately—with "new one." (612)

"Donny Johnny" is also an ongoing source of gender subversion through his frequently feminine performance and presentation. However, the Don Juan figure's newfound feminization does not serve to alienate the poem's characters nor the reader—rather, his non-normativity invokes allure, curiosity, and even reverence from peers and suitors alike, thereby encouraging the same from his audience. The near-universal acceptance of Don Juan's non-normativity pointedly contrasts with Byron's own encounters with the restrictions imposed by "that sect of horrible, snivelling, fanatics" (Moore 77), perhaps suggesting that the poet could at least create an idyllic England in his art. Similarly, Don Juan's queerness does not contribute to any moral lapse on his behalf—instead, immorality is to be found within the manipulative, deceitful society surrounding him. Byron effectively separates the notion of queerness from that of depravity in *Don Juan*,

thereby encouraging readers to sever their preconceived connections between sexuality and morality.

Prior to delving into a “queer reading” of *Don Juan*, we must first establish that such a reading is not exclusive to a homosexual context. As noted earlier, Don Juan’s non-normativity is precisely what queers *Don Juan*; as Donald Hall argues in *Queer Theories*, to “queer” is to “put pressure on simplistic notions of identity and disturb the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity, sexual identity in particular” (14). Don Juan as a character is then, by theoretical standards, rife with queerness not only in regard to his sexuality, but also through his gender performance, gender expression, and literary traditions. Even if Don Juan’s non-normativity is not a point of contention in the text, his identity still disrupts the dominant ideology of masculinity in nineteenth-century England. Hall describes the interconnectivity of a text’s location—geographically and historically:

Queer texts often historicize and localize sexuality and sexual identity assumptions
When the queer text, which may expose contextual influences and the class, race, and/or cultural identity-related interplay of sexualities and subjectivities, is met with queer critical practices similarly interested in complexity and specificity, then supple and sophisticated readings can be generated. (166)

Likewise, characters beyond Don Juan—i.e., the homosexual narrator and hypersexual women, for instance—also deviate from England’s societal expectations of gender and sex. Byron’s continued usage of coded language and double-entendres provide far more than mere titillating wordplay; through his language, readers receive a rare glimpse into England’s homosexual subculture as well as the methods used by queer persons to circumvent pressures to conform to their assigned sex and gender—even by going so far as to masquerade as the other sex. In *Don*

Juan, Byron's biographical knowledge and the context it provides for nineteenth-century England enables the modern scholar to queer his poem while nevertheless remaining responsible when making assumptions related to the intended time period.

Byron's nameless narrator—who, it may be argued, is Byron himself—is the primary source of homosexuality throughout *Don Juan*. In multiple instances, the narrator's interjections are coded similarly to those of Byron's Cambridge correspondences; his desire for Don Juan is censored but nonetheless present and persistent within the poem. Jonathan Gross' "One Half of What I Should Say: Byron's Gay Narrator in *Don Juan*" provides extensive evidence in support of the narrator's homosexuality and prioritizes the urgent need to do so. Gross argues:

To focus critical attention on a "gay" voice in Byron's poem exposes the extent to which editions of *Don Juan* have privileged heterosexual plot over homoerotic digression . . . The Oxford and Norton anthologies omit the difficult and richly allusive stanzas crucial to our understanding of the narrator's point of view, while retaining those aspects of the heterosexual plot concerned with Juan's affair with Julia. Yet readers cannot hope to understand the poem's irony without considering the narrator's ironic relationship to the very legend of Don Juan he both narrates and subverts. (323-324)

The dismissal of evident homosexuality in favor of lesser-substantiated heterosexuality is a shared failing of *Don Juan* and the vast majority of Byron's many biographies, the latter of which only began to widely acknowledge the poet's same-sex inclinations within the past several decades. Early censorship succeeded in effectively silencing the homosexual subtext of Byron's narrator and Byron's own homosexual reality at once. Indeed, without the context of Byron's now-infamous Cambridge letters, readers of *Don Juan* lacked the ability to connect Byron's

notorious double-entendres and coded language to the poem, thereby rendering him wholly separate from his narrator and leaving their mutual homosexuality unexplored and inaccessible. To the modern scholar, however, these literary techniques may be readily dissected and applied to their appropriate context.

The double-entendres used to express the homosexuality of Byron's narrator begin almost immediately in the poem's text. While preparing the exposition of Don Juan's past, the narrator proclaims:

That is the usual method, but not mine—
My way is to begin with the beginning;
The regularity of my design
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning (1.VII)

Byron's use of the word "method" appears eight times in *Don Juan*; although the intention is arguably applicable to each occurrence, this instance is most certainly a reference to Byron's previously discussed *ma methode*, or the homosexual, often-pederast "methodistes." The "regularity of design" may then be understood as the societal regulation exerted upon the homosexuality shared between Byron and his narrator, "wandering" referring to the act of sodomy, and the "worst of sinning," Blackstone's *peccatum illud horribile*: "that horrible crime." Gross provides a spectacular interpretation of an additional double-entendre—one which is perhaps the most vulgar, if not simply corporeal, wordplay in *Don Juan*'s entirety. The narrator taunts his readers with the proper "method" of reading the poem, leading them as follows:

O reader! if that thou canst read,—and know,
'T is not enough to spell, or even to read,
To constitute a reader; there must go
Virtues of which both you and I have need;—
Firstly, begin with the beginning (*though*

That clause is hard); and secondly, proceed;

Thirdly, commence not with the end—or, sinning

In this sort, end at least with the beginning. (XIII.LXXIII)

Should the seasoned Byron reader refuse to take his narrator literally, Byron's sexual language may be spotted at first glance—"though / *That clause is hard*" certainly suits an erotic context.

Gross argues that verse is more complex than mere phallic metaphors alone, however:

A second look at these comments reveals a series of metonymies ("Beginning"; "proceed"; "commence"; "end"; "sinning/In this sort") that connect ways of reading with sexual acts . . . For Byron's narrator, an epic poem is analogous to the human body, which may be seduced or read from the front or back. As in other sections of the poem, the ostensibly heterosexual plot is undermined by suggestions that the anatomy the narrator has in mind is male—its "front" is hard, and entry at its "end" is prohibited. (332)

Gross' assertion that the narrator's fixation with the body extends exclusively to the male form is necessary for a homosexual reading; notably, it is not only the male body as a whole that preoccupies the narrator, but Don Juan's body in particular. The narrator openly boasts his high regard for men, repeatedly prioritizing male characters over their female counterparts; an example of his bias may be seen as he introduces Don Juan's parents, musing, "And therefore I shall open with a line / (Although it cost me half an hour in spinning) / Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father, / And also of his mother, if you 'd rather" (1.VII). The woman—in this case, Donna Inez—is an afterthought that the narrator is willing to overlook in favor of her husband, Don Jose, who he then proclaims "A better cavalier ne'er mounted horse, / Or, being mounted, e'er got down again" (I.IX). The narrator even offers that he "knew [Don Jose] well" and that the couple were an "ill-sorted pair" (I.LI), perhaps due to Don Jose's homosexual proclivities. In

Mapping Male Sexuality: Nineteenth-century England, Elizabeth Dell expounds upon the implications of the narrator's choice of phrasing, stating, "The narrator's carnal knowledge of Juan's father might explain why he knows as much as he does about the son—a fact that goes otherwise unexplained. It might also explain the slightly effeminate nature of Juan, who may have inherited his father's complicated sexual desire" (101). With the presence of homosexuality now extending beyond Byron's narrator, it is evident that Byron intended to establish his own homosexual culture in the world of *Don Juan*; the narrator, as seemingly influential and well-versed in the ins-and-outs of the gay landscape, takes on Byron's spearheading position within it.

Don Juan's perpetual gender subversion bolsters Dell's claims regarding Don Juan's effeminacy. As previously discussed, Byron's Don Juan lacks the hypermasculine, exclusively male bravado of his past iterations; through Byron, Don Juan is recast as a delicate, beautiful, graceful youth capable of seducing women and men alike. Byron's lifelong ardor for feminine beauty is made manifest here to the extent that Don Juan could, perhaps, be imagined as one of the many "hyacinths" that the poet often plucked from their proverbial gardens. Nevertheless, Don Juan never abandons his male identity outright, and instead adopts traits and behaviors from the gender binary—he is an amalgam of traits associated with the male and female, wielding the virility of a man with the beauty of a woman. In *Androgyny's Challenge to the Law of the Father: Don Juan as Epic in Reverse*, Christina Dukuo further clarifies Don Juan's unconventional allure, explaining, "Both the subject and author of Don Juan are male; however, Byron's twist on the legend is that his Don does not acquire his status through the seduction of women, but through being seduced *by* and *into* femininity; that is, he displays traits such as sexual passivity and vulnerability that are traditionally deemed feminine" (11). One such instance of Don Juan's seduction by the feminine may be seen in his crossdressing, which occurs

several times in the poem. In the fifth canto, Don Juan is purchased from the slave market in secret by the sultana Gulbayez, whose eunuch companion, Baba, insists that Don Juan dress in women's garb. Throughout several verses, Don Juan endures a lengthy transformation into the external feminine:

Sighing, on he slipped,
A pair of trousers of flesh-colour'd silk;
Next with a virgin zone he was equipp'd,
Which girt a slight chemise as white as milk;
But tugging on his petticoat, he tripp'd.

.....

Whilk, which (or what you please), was owing to
His garment's novelty, and his being awkward:
And yet at last he managed to get through
His toilet, though no doubt a little backward:
The negro Baba help'd a little too,
When some untoward part of raiment stuck hard;
And, wrestling both his arms into a gown,
He paused, and took a survey up and down.

One difficulty still remain'd—his hair
Was hardly long enough; but Baba found
So many false long tresses all to spare,
That soon his head was most completely crown'd,
After the manner then in fashion there;
And this addition with such gems was bound,
As suited the ensemble of his toilet,
While Baba made him comb his head and oil it. (5.LXXVI-LXXIX)

The scheme to dress Don Juan in women's clothing is, notably, initiated by the biologically female sultana and acted upon by Baba, the castrated (and therefore feminized) eunuch. Don Juan is then presented to Gulbayez "femininely all array'd" (5.LXXX), who pursues him as a potential sex slave fervently despite—or perhaps *because of*—his womanly whims. Don Juan's experience as a near-concubine echoes the adventures of his literary predecessors, albeit this version is subverted by Byron, who proceeds to cast Gulbayez as the possessor and Don Juan as her sex object. Jennifer Sarha takes note of this reversal in 'The Sultan's Self Shan't Carry Me': Negotiations of Harem Fantasies in Byron's *Don Juan*":

Byron uses stylized notions of gender to produce eroticized scenarios; Juan's sentimental masculinity at the slavemarket invites Gulbeyaz to take up a libertine pose, and the virtuous heroinism he adopts with his slavewoman disguise situates him within a heteronormative harem romance as well as a homoerotic fantasy . . . This stylization of bodies, positions, and subjectivities serves to undermine any idea of desire based on a simple binary of sexed bodies, but rather locates eroticism in the play between gendered roles and conventions. (23)

Indeed, Don Juan's heterosexual romance with the domineering Gulbeyaz strikes a particularly queer chord due to the ongoing gender subversion exhibited by the sultana and her crossdressing slave. Considering the constant flux of gendered behavior and dress within Don Juan, Byron appears to assert that the gender itself is a mere stage play, complete with costumes and scripts.

With *Don Juan*'s multifaceted queerness in mind, Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" provides a further theory from which to examine Don Juan's ambiguous behavior; should readers subscribe to Butler's claims, Don Juan may be considered an actor upon the stage of sexual and gender identities who is thereby capable of changing roles at will—a

performance, as described in Butler's first chapter. Butler expounds on her concept of gender performance, as well as limitations relevant to *Don Juan*:

Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally-restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (103)

Although Byron flips the aforementioned scripts of gender and sexuality, he is aware of the penalties should the effeminate Don Juan and his "handsome" women linger too long in gender liminality. Almost as soon as Don Juan appears crossdressed, he returns to his masculine attire; as soon as the overtly aggressive Gulbeyaz threatens him with castration, she weeps, only for the queer performance to begin anew in the next canto—or on another "stage," if you will. The serial-style publication of *Don Juan* was additionally befitting to Byron's bait-and-switch tactics, allowing him to place a convenient distance between each instance of queerness in the poem. At the time of *Don Juan*'s writing, Byron—now in his thirties—was well-acquainted with the sexual limitations of nineteenth-century England and the ensuing consequences for challenging them; although he evaded legal retaliation by his equivocal approach to non-normative gender performance, critics and readers were keenly aware of Byron's transgression. MacCarthy notes that *Don Juan* was immediately controversial amongst readers, where "in respectable households, *Don Juan* was regarded as subversive . . . and read, if read at all, by adults camouflaged between plain covers" (365). Predictably, the public at large took poorly to Byron's raunchy, sex-laden tapestry of queerness—at first, *Don Juan*'s critical reception was cold at best, confirming the poet's suspicion that his portrayal of a fluid, malleable gender was "too free for these very modest days" (Marchand 286).

Surprisingly, despite the bevy of queer content to be found in *Don Juan*, critics interested in the queer Byron often overlook the misadventures of the youthful beauty, his handsome women, and his pining narrator are often overlooked in favor of Byron's more blatantly homoerotic poetry, such as the Thyrza poems and the semi-autobiographical *Childe Harold*. Although *Don Juan* is the more laborious text to "queer" due to the numerous instances of jargon and nuanced references—many of which require access to, and an understanding of, Byron's Cambridge correspondences—I argue that *Don Juan* is the most valuable text in Byron's canon to not only pry into the poet's innermost thoughts on sexuality and gender, but also to bring my thesis full-circle. Indeed, *Don Juan* is not only inextricable from Byron's biographies, but it also provides a thorough illustration of the queer libertine, the closeted homosexual, and how each figure circumnavigated the hostile world of anti-sodomy laws and rigid gender codes.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Amid all of his double-entendres and near-nonsensically coded language, it is evident that the closeted, lonely Byron wielded his poetry as a means to communicate with men of similar sexual persuasion. Moreover, for Byron and his audience, whereas poet and reader perhaps never met, their mutual jargon served as a connection in a society that would see them separated, silenced, and possibly even executed for their homosexuality. Byron's poetry—from *Don Juan* to standalone stanzas—endures as a testament to the often overlooked but historically crucial queer culture of nineteenth-century England. Just as important as the texts themselves, however, is the queer poet often obscured by his heterosexual scandals alone. In true Don

Juanistic fashion, Byron's copious bravado with women appears to have been a diversion from his secret, homosexual liaisons. Based upon Byron's correspondences revealing copious indulgence in "pl & opt Cs," we know that Byron did not intend to divert from his own same-sex desires; rather, Byron's philandering, flirtatious reputation amongst women provided moral reformation movements with a distinctly heterosexual distraction. England's longstanding reverence for dogmatically-driven, religious fervor fostered an environment that such circumvention was a necessity for Byron and for his queer companions, all of whom lived in the looming shadows of King Henry VIII, William Blackstone, and numerous publications calling for the mistreatment—or even death—of homosexuals. Therefore, the "death of the author" approach to literature is not only inapplicable but is, in fact, detrimental to Byron's works; Byron's poetry is a queer historical account in itself, imbued with his experiences of homosexual love, loss, and struggle that must not be overlooked for mere criticism's sake.

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