

REREADING BYRON

Essays Selected From Hofstra University's
Byron Bicentennial Conference

Edited by
Alice Levine and Robert N. Keane

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Volume 5

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Byron Bicentennial Conference*

Edited by

Alice Levine
and
Robert N. Keane

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Alice Levine
Robert N. Keane

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Preface

The papers collected in this volume were delivered at Hofstra University in October 1988 at a conference celebrating the bicentennial of Lord Byron's birth. The shared goal of these papers was a reassessment of Byron's poetry, his poetic development, and his relation to his contemporaries in light of recent scholarship and criticism. Bicentennial birthdays invite such stock-taking, particularly of a poet whose literary reputation, from the period of the Regency to that of the New Criticism and after, has fluctuated widely. And as a poet whose charisma—whose felt presence as a historic and literary phenomenon or myth—cannot but impinge, for better or for worse, upon readers' responses to and critics' judgments of his works, Byron indeed demands periodic reevaluation.

Such a reevaluation is made all the more appropriate at present by the exceptionally high standard of today's Byron texts—the letters and journals edited by Leslie Marchand (1973–1982) and the poetry edited by Jerome McGann (the first six volumes of which were published between 1980 and 1991)—and by new developments in biographical and socio-historical studies of Romantic poetry. The essays in *Rereading Byron* represent work by several generations of scholars of Romanticism, ranging from those who have lived with Byron for decades to those whose first acquaintance with his works has been made through the various lenses of recent critical theory.

The bicentennial conference held in the Spring of 1988 at Trinity College, Cambridge also focused on a reassessment of Byron's poetic achievement and resulted in a book of essays, *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, edited by Andrew Rutherford (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1990). As companion volumes, *Byron: Augustan and Romantic* and *Rereading Byron* provide a map of current critical approaches to Byron's work, and perhaps the best measure of Byron's literary

achievement is, in fact, the richness of insights in these books. They illustrate not the two-century-oldness of the poetry but, rather, how much of it is first being brought to light, how the “slight, trim/But *still* sea-worthy skiff” on which Byron had hoped to “skim the Ocean of Eternity” has not yet foundered.

Rereading Byron

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Byron and “The Truth in Masquerade”

Jerome J. McGann

I

Like all poets and artists, Byron is often found re-using earlier work in later circumstances—manipulating and changing it for different purposes. Normally these alterations take place as it were “in private,” and readers only become aware of the transformations when they are brought to light by subsequent academic or scholarly investigation.

But there are also cases where textual manipulations are carried out as it were half publicly and half in secret. These are the cases—they are peculiarly Byronic—which I want to discuss here. We may recall for instance the several alternative uses to which the text of “When We Two Parted” was put.¹ Published in his 1816 volume of *Poems*, these verses were there dated 1808, with the obvious intention (we now know)—given Byron’s circumstances in 1816—of indicating that the lines had nothing directly to do with his wife or his recent domestic problems. The 1808 date would have suggested, to those with knowledge of Byron’s life, that the lines referred to Mary Chaworth. And in fact this is the way the poem was commonly read for over a century.

But the lines were not written in 1808—that was a ruse of Byron’s—they were written in 1815; and their immediate subject was Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster. Byron manipulated his 1816 text in order to hide that fact, but he did so deceptively, in a kind of code. The date “1808” printed with the poem is a diversion, but one which, once registered as a diversion (or a possible diversion), points the reader toward other dates and other contexts of reading. Byron’s London social circle—and his wife—would have been alive to those other possibilities. Lady Byron had made a copy of “When We Two Parted” for Byron in 1815, which, she well knew, had nothing to do with 1808. Furthermore, Lady Melbourne and her circle would have recognized at least some of “When We Two Parted” as a passage from an unpublished poem of 1812—a poem written to Lady Caroline beginning “Go! Triumph securely, that treacherous vow.” Several copies of that poem were in London circulation, and one or another of these copies were certainly known at least to Lady Caroline, Lady Melbourne, and Beau Brummell. Furthermore, considering the habits of the fast world of the Regency, and the market

value which Byron and his poetry had in that world, we can be certain that “the knowing ones,” in this instance, were not confined to four people.

Thus that “false date” of 1808 would have signalled several very different lines of interpretation in 1816, depending upon the point of view adopted by the reader. 1808 would have been recognized as a mystification by Lady Byron and others as well, though in each case the search for “the truth” of the poem would have been conducted along different lines and from different premises. What may not have been recognized—what probably was not recognized—was the kind of deliberateness with which Byron carried out his mystification. That he anticipated and desired a disbelief in the date of 1808 by *some* readers is clear not merely from the circumstances of composition and publication, but from Byron’s 1823 correspondence with his cousin Lady Hardy, who was herself an intimate of Byron and his London world in the Years of Fame. In a letter to her of 10 June 1823 he told her that “the secret” of “When We Two Parted” was that it was written to Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster. But of course this only added a further level of mystification, or another direction from which the poem could be read.²

In the case of “When We Two Parted” we are dealing with a type of textual manipulation which seems to me extremely significant, and not merely for the reader of Byron’s poetry. Let us pause for a moment to reflect on what is happening here—and also on what is *not* happening. It is one thing—a common thing—for poets, as for all artists, to plunder and re-use their work for different purposes and under different circumstances. And it is also one thing—an equally common thing—for poets to foreground their processes of writing, to make the act of writing a subject or topic of their work. It is quite another thing—far less common—for writers to manipulate their work so as to draw out and exploit the complicity of their readers and audiences.

The case of “When We Two Parted” shows, however, how readers can be imagined by texts, how they can be caught and defined by their own expectations and preconceptions. For acts of reading are always carried out by minds prepared to read in certain ways by their determinate social, personal, and institutional circumstances. More than most poets, Byron understood this, and his understanding led him into a mode of poetry where readers, along with their various preconceptions, are drawn into the theatre of the poetry, and forced to confront, or refuse to confront, themselves. Byron manipulates “When We Two Parted” in order to call out certain lines of reading,

certain interpretative options; and the poem then becomes an opportunity to learn to read—ultimately, to learn to read oneself—more self-consciously. The concrete equivalent of such a style is precisely the Byronic Hero, who

had the skill, when Cunning's gaze would seek
To probe his heart and watch his changing cheek,
At once the observer's purpose to espy,
And on himself roll back his scrutiny,
Lest he to Conrad rather should betray
Some secret thought, than drag that chief's to day.

(*Corsair* I.217–22)

To work in this way is necessarily to develop a clear initial sense of who is—and who is not—your audience. Byron's understanding of this necessity came to him very early, as his first five books (from *Fugitive Pieces* through *English Bards*) clearly show. In those books certain people and groups of people are addressed and others are not, and these inclusions/exclusions extend down to individual poems. *Hours of Idleness*, for example, has several homoerotic poems which are presented in coded forms that open and close different reading possibilities, depending on the point of view and context in which the reading occurs. And consider, for instance, a poem like the one titled in these early printings “Damaetas.” It is a descriptive sketch of a youth who has had an early education in vicious living, deceit, and hypocrisy. The title is itself a piece of code, referring back to Virgil and Theocritus. It is a cunning title which might, or might not, have homoerotic overtones. But the title is a diversion in another sense, as one discovers with a knowledge of the poem's MS (the autograph is no longer extant apparently). Byron's MS title was “My Character,” not “Damaetas.”³

“Damaetas” (or “My Character”) is thus a deceitful poem, and part of its wit lies in its own deceitful execution. We cannot be absolutely certain that Byron's close school friends were privy to these various levels of poetic equivocation, but it is difficult to believe—given the character of Byron's school friendships—that some of them were not. Who was or was not *in fact* a part of the audience of this poem's witty deceits is not, finally, the point. The point is that the poem is operating in such a rhetorical structure—even if, *in fact*, Byron was the only person at the time who knew what was involved in it.

This case is a nice illustration of how Byron uses different levels of poetic coding to define his audiences. It is a procedure which will be spectacularly displayed in *Don Juan* and its associated poems, where

Byron executes a many-levelled discourse comparable—in its own unregenerate secularity—to Dante’s. As in all such writing, multiplying meanings entails playing with language, developing systems of punning and coded talk which require some kind of special knowledge to decipher. Such knowledge is both factual and procedural. “The grand Arcanum’s not for men to see all,” Byron says in a peculiarly important passage of Canto XIV, “And there is much that could not be appreciated/ In any manner by the uninitiated.” These lines are unusual only because of the way they have foregrounded this aspect of the poem at the level of conscious methodology.⁴ *Don Juan* is of course a mine of such materials. What we sometimes forget is that the *Don Juan* manner is precisely designed *not* to disguise its own procedures of mystification. Rather, flaunting its doubletalk, the poem turns human hypocrisy and deceit (those sins against the human light) toward redemption by translating them into a poetic method—which is to say, by bringing them into the open. In Byron, poetry becomes not an Aristotelian “imitation of reality”, where one side or the other of that transaction tends to be thrown into obscurity. Rather, it is what Byron calls “The truth in masquerade” (XI.290), a situation where—to borrow a Yeatsian metaphor—body is not bruised to pleasure soul. When truth appears in masquerade, medium and message are placed on a new footing with respect to each other: not reconciled, certainly, and least of all married, but, as it were, living together in sin.

Because “When We Two Parted” involves a comparable masquerade of its truth, the poem exploits and even encourages its audience’s awareness that more is being said than might at first seem apparent. In this way it begins to develop a kind of social consciousness: on one hand, contexts of reading which transcend the immediate are invoked, and on the other, the audience is made aware of itself as a participant in the construction of those contexts. The poem can be read in purely lexical space, of course, but such a reading will not merely have missed certain relevant details, it will in the end have misunderstood *the poem* by having misunderstood *how* the poem works.

We may well be reminded, in *this* context, of two important historical realities in the history of Byron criticism: that its dominant mode has always been heavily “biographical,” and that the text-centered procedures of twentieth-century criticism have rarely been able to read Byron’s work in interesting ways. Such criticism then simply declared Byron’s work, and especially his non-satirical work, to be unimportant and uninteresting. But the fact is that Byron’s

poetry would be uninteresting *by definition* to this kind of criticism. The real critical task is to define the peculiar form of Byron's procedures, on one hand, and to assess his execution of those procedures, on the other.

Thus far we have observed Byron organizing the poetical experience as a social and historical event. This is a given in nearly all his work. In the examples we shall now be turning to, however, the stakes will be higher, the issues more important, the risks far greater. Indeed, we shall be looking at cases where, I believe, Byron reached a watershed in his career as a writer, and where he first came to understand adequately the limits, the dangers, and the opportunities in a poetry of coded discourse. In the end, we may perhaps come to see Byron's poetical methods in a different light.

II

So let me make a second beginning here. A frequent charge against Byron—it has been especially prevalent in the twentieth century—is that his work lacks authenticity because he was too preoccupied with his audiences and their reactions. His poetry aims, it is judged, at cheap and factitious effects by pandering to the (presumably debased) expectations of his reading publics (and one must say “publics” because they were, as they always are, multiple, overlapping, and distinctive).

Now this is a highly problematic argument for two reasons. In the first place, all of Byron's universally acknowledged masterpieces—*Don Juan*, for example, or *Beppo*, or “The Vision of Judgment”—evoke and reciprocate audience expectations and reactions which are at once various and determinate. Why do those poems succeed where (let us say) *Manfred* and “Fare Thee Well!” are thought to fail? This is a question which Philip Martin, in his excellent recent book *Byron. A Poet Before His Public*, was never really able to answer.⁵ He was not able to answer it because his measures of critical judgment remain committed to the idea of the autonomy of the poetic event. For him, although poetry may engage its audiences, its distinctively *poetical* character and value have to be judged through aesthetic criteria which are too narrowly conceived.

Odd as it may seem, the correlative of this approach to Byron's poetry is the often-stated idea that to appreciate his work you have to take him in the gross (in both senses). Thus Donald Reiman speaks for many when he says that “Modern students who read *Manfred* without having waded through all of Byron's preceding volumes are

probably unable to imagine the cumulative effect of his poetry.”⁶ This view assumes the social dimension of Byron’s work and does not condemn it on that account; nonetheless, it is driven to apologize (“waded through”) for the fact that appreciation of the work has to depend upon an awareness of audience reciprocities, or what Reiman calls here “the cumulative effect of his poetry.”

Now I believe that these two scholars are correct to the extent that they force us to pay attention to the poetry’s social and contextual dimensions. What I would like to argue, however, is that neither has elucidated how a poetry of “cumulative effect” actually works, and in what ways it moves beyond the autonomous resources of language (narrowly conceived).

To this end let us first look at a notorious work, “Fare Thee Well!”, which Byron addressed to his wife at the time of the Separation controversies in the spring of 1816.⁷ The poem descends to us largely through one line of interpretation, which reads it as a *cri du coeur* from a heartbroken husband. This is the way the poem was read by many people in 1816. Madame de Stael, for instance, and Sir Francis Burdett, and various reviewers all read it this way and praised it extravagantly.⁸ And Wordsworth read it this way as well, only he anticipated the common later judgment that the poem is hopelessly mawkish: “disgusting in sentiment, and in execution contemptible. . . . Can worse doggrel be written. . . ?”⁹

But another, very different reading sprang up when the poem began circulating in 1816, like tares among the wheat of that first reading. Byron’s friend Moore—who was later to endorse the sentimental theory of the poem—was at first deeply suspicious of “the sentiment that could, at such a moment, indulge in such verses.”¹⁰ Moore did not elaborate on his suspicions, but others did. The reviewer of *The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems* in the *Critical Review* of November 1816 paused to reflect on the earlier “domestic” poem:

for many who disapproved most of his lordship’s... publication of his “Farewell” address, as inflicting a parting and lasting pang upon his lady, thought that the lines were most delightfully pathetic, and wondered how a man, who shewed he had so little heart, could evince such feeling. They did not know how easy it was for a person of his lordship’s skill to fabricate neatly-turned phraseology, and for a person of his lordship’s ingenuity to introduce to advantage all the common-places of affection: the very excellence of that poem in these particulars, to

us and to others, was a convincing proof that its author had much more talent than tenderness.¹¹

As it happens, Annabella herself, the person to whom “Fare Thee Well!” was most directly addressed, read the poem in just this insidious way. It seemed to her yet another instance of Byron’s “talent for equivocation . . . of [which] I have had many proofs in his letters”.¹² On 13 Feb., a month before Byron wrote his poem, she explained this “talent” further and pointed out that she learned about it from Byron himself:

I should not have been *more* deceived than I was by his letters, if he had not pointed out to me in similar ones addressed to others, the deepest design in words that appeared to have none. On this he piques himself—and also on being able to write such letters as will convey different, or even opposite sentiments to the person who receives them & to a stranger.¹³

“Every day,” she added, “proves deeper art” in her husband. What she most feared was “this ambiguity of Language in the Law,” that it would give Byron an advantage over her in the Separation proceedings.

Annabella went on to add two observations which are equally interesting and shrewd. Byron’s skill in manipulating language reminded her of a passage in *Lara* (l.504–9) in which the deportment of that Byronic hero is exposed as a text of such ambiguity that, reading it, one cannot be certain if it signals a heart filled with “the calmness of the good” or with a “guilt grown old in desperate hardihood.” And she added that this skill with words was one “he is *afraid of*” himself.

In a good recent essay W. Paul Elledge has revived a variant of this insidious reading of “Fare Thee Well!” The poem, he argues, is “a portrait of indecision, taut with antithetical tensions”; it “charts . . . the depth and configurations of the poet’s ambivalence. . . toward reconciliation with his wife.”¹⁴ Although Elledge is, I believe, certainly correct in this reading of the poem, he does not go nearly far enough, either substantively or methodologically. In this respect the readings of both the *Critical* reviewer and Lady Byron seem to me more weighty and profound.

What Annabella and the *Critical* reviewer call attention to are the social contexts in which the poem was executed. Annabella was peculiarly alive to such matters because they touched upon her life in the most important ways. “Fare Thee Well!” was not simply a thing of beauty, an aesthetic object spinning in the disinterested space of a

Kantian (or Coleridgean) theoretical world. It was an event in the language of art, specifically located, and she registered that event in particular ways. To her the Separation controversy came to involve two primary matters. There was first the matter of the law, and who, in the complex legal maneuverings, would have power over the other to influence various decisions (Lady Byron feared, for example, that Byron would seek to deprive her of custody of their daughter Ada). And second there was the (closely related) matter of public opinion, and who would enter into and finally emerge from the Separation proceedings with what sort of public image.

When Byron sent her a copy of "Fare Thee Well!" soon after he wrote it, Lady Byron was quick to read it as a shrewd ploy to gain power over her in the context of those two areas of interest which most concerned her. At first she emphasized the "legal" reading, for she felt that Byron's various communications were designed to construct a sympathetic self-image in order to improve his bargaining position. "He has been assuming the character of an injured & affectionate husband with great success to some," she remarked in mid-February.¹⁵ When Byron sent her a MS copy of the poem late in March, she wrote ironically to her mother of its apparent tenderness, "and so he talks of me to Every one."¹⁶ But the poem did not disturb her greatly until she learned of Byron's intention to print and distribute it privately in London society. This act, she feared, would turn "The Tide of feeling. . . against" her,¹⁷ but she was dissuaded from her first impulse—to publish a rejoinder—by the counsel of Dr. Stephen Lushington.

The significance of all this becomes more clear, I think, if we recall that "Fare Thee Well!" was initially constituted as three very different texts, two of which were manipulated by Byron, while the other fell under the co-authority of persons and powers who were hostile to him. The first of these texts is the one which originates in the MS poem addressed to Lady Byron, and which Byron circulated in London in late March and early April. The second is the text privately printed in fifty copies and distributed on 8 April, at Byron's insistence and over the objections of his publisher Murray. Byron's activities here are important to remember because they show that he was manipulating the poem, was literally fashioning an audience for it of a very specific kind. The original MS may have been addressed to his wife, but when copies of that poem began to be circulated, a new text started to emerge. The printed text in fifty copies represents the definitive emergence of that text, which was addressed past Lady Byron to a circle of friends, acquaintances, and other interested

parties whose “reading” and “interpretation” of the poem Byron wanted to generate, and of course influence.

In the most limited sense, Byron wanted his poem to be read as the effusion of an “injured and affectionate husband.” Moore’s later report in his *Life*, that the MS text he saw was covered with Byron’s tears, represents in effect such an interpretation of the poem. But the fact that Byron was also managing a certain kind of circulation for the poem set in motion other forces, and other readings, which were only latent (so to speak) in the verbal MS text. The poem, that is to say, came to be widely viewed as another event in Byron’s troubled “domestic circumstances.” It is this circulation of the verses which begins to change the meaning of the poem—indeed, which begins to change the poem itself. The words of the original MS do not significantly differ from the privately printed text; nonetheless, that first printed text has become another poem, and one which sets in motion an urgency toward the production of yet another textual change.

This new change is definitive when the privately printed text finally makes its appearance in *The Champion* on 14 April and thence throughout the periodical press. This is a new poem altogether. In the first place, it does not appear alone but alongside the bitter satire on Mrs. Clermont, a work which Byron had also put into private circulation in fifty copies several days before he began circulating “Fare Thee Well!” In *The Champion* text, “A Sketch” is presented as an exponent of the “real meaning” of “Fare Thee Well!”, that is to say, it is used partly for the light it sheds on “Fare Thee Well!”, as a way of exposing Byron’s hypocritical malignancy. In the second place, the farewell poem is accompanied, in *The Champion*, by a long commentary denouncing Byron’s character as well as his politics, and explicitly “reading” the two poems as evidence of his wickedness.

The Champion text of “Fare Thee Well!” is, I would say, the definitive version of the (so to speak) *hypocritical* poem, just as the MS version sent to Lady Byron—which, interestingly, seems not to have survived—would be the definitive version of the *sentimental* poem. The “texts” between these two versions dramatize this first, crucial stage in the poem’s processes of transformation. But they do not conclude those processes. Even as *The Champion* text is completing that first stage of the poem’s transformations, it has initiated a new stage, the one in which the two faces of this poem are forced to confront one another. It is in this next stage of its textual development that “Fare Thee Well!” becomes most rich and interesting. This is the poem whose meaning focuses and brings to a climax the controver-

sies among the readers in Byron's day. The question is gone over again and again: is this a poem of love ("sentimental") or a poem of hate ("hypocritical")? The final contemporary text declares that in an important sense it is both. Byron himself produced the materialized version of this culminant text when he published the poem, with the telling epigraph from "Christabel," in his *Poems* (1816).

This is the text which Elledge has recently revived, a work full of painful and even frightening tensions and contradictions. And while I want to salute Elledge's success in rescuing Byron's poem from its impoverished sentimental readings, I must also point out Elledge's insistence—it stems from his New Critical background—that his is not a reading of a work of poetry so much as an exploration of a set of tense personal circumstances: "my concern is less with the poem as poem than with the dynamics of the relationship between poet-husband and audience-wife as Byron represents them."¹⁸ He makes this statement because his notion is that "the poem as poem" is an abstract verbal construct, a "text" that not only can be, but must be, divorced from the social and material formations within which the work was instituted and carried out.

Such an idea commits one to an unnecessary critical blindness. The impediment is specially apparent for a poet like Byron only because of the manifest ways in which his work utilizes the social and institutional resources of language. In this respect "Fare Thee Well!" would be for criticism an important theoretical work precisely for the way it foregrounds Byron's ideas about what poetry actually is and how it works.

In any event, for Byron himself the work was epochal. Through it Byron came to see very clearly—that is to say, with pain and reluctance—the full significance of his poetic practice. In writing and circulating "Fare Thee Well!" he was the author and agent of the completed work, the one who finally would be responsible for all of the texts. Yet while Byron authored those texts, he could not fully control them—this, the fate of all poets, is sometimes called their "inspiration"—so that in the end he found that he too, like all the others who would involve themselves with the poem, would have to trust the tale and not the teller. His discovery of this, a bitter revelation, would soon find expression in another of the "Poems on his Domestic Circumstances": the "[Epistle to Augusta]" which he wrote in the summer of 1816. Reflecting on that "talent for equivocation" which he flaunted before his wife, Byron would expose its equivocal character:

The fault was mine—nor do I seek to screen
My errors with defensive paradox—
I have been cunning in mine overthrow
The careful pilot of my proper woe.

(21–24)

Which is as much to say of that most “cunning” of his poems to date, “Fare Thee Well!”, that it tells more than one would have imagined possible, tells more than its own author wanted told.

I shall shortly return to indicate what I believe this kind of analysis signifies for a concrete “reading” of “Fare Thee Well!”. But first I would ask you to reflect upon certain matters of general relevance for Byron’s poetry. When we say that Byron’s is a highly rhetorical poetry we mean—we should mean—not that it is loud or overblown, but that it is always, at whatever register, elaborating reciprocities with its audiences. These reciprocities, like all social relations, accumulate their own histories as time passes and more interchanges occur—and we then call these “the cumulative effect” of the work. New poetry is written—and read—within the context of those accumulations. The development of the various texts of “Fare Thee Well!” between March and November 1816 is a miniature example of how these reciprocities can get played out. Or Byron’s employment of the “false date” of 1808 in “When We Two Parted” is an execution of poetic wit that utilizes “the cumulative effect” and history of Byron’s work (the writing and the reading of that work, the entirety of its history).

Byron wrote this way throughout his life. The masterpiece of *Don Juan* is a work of, quite literally, *consummate* skill, because the whole of his life and career is gathered into it. Without an awareness of, an involvement in, that poem’s “cumulative effect” one will be reduced simply to reading its words: as Eliot in this connection *might* have said, *not* to have the experience *and* to miss the meaning.

Related to this rhetorical framework of the poetry is Byron’s habit of manipulating his texts. To present a work through a “cumulative” context is to open it to changes and modifications, in fact, to new opportunities of meaning: not so much, as Coleridge would have had it, the “reconciliation” of “opposite and discordant qualities” as their artistic exploitation. “Fare Thee Well!” did not bring about any reconciliations, poetic or otherwise; it raised a tumult of new discords and conflicts. Yet it is those very tumults, and their artistic significance, which turned the period of Byron’s Separation—from his wife, from England—to a watershed in his career, and in his understanding of what was involved, for him, in his methods of poetic production.