

Rosemarie Rowley: **BYRON AND WOMEN**

.....*A mind*

*To comprehend the universe:.....*

*Her faults were mine, her virtues were her own*

*I loved her, and destroy'd her.*

**Byron - Manfred Scene 2**

Byron had a bad start with women. His mother, Catherine Gordon of Gight, suffered from mood swings, a sharp tongue and unrelenting bad temper, even at one time biting the tea cup savagely when she did not get her way. She often taunted him because of his club foot, calling him a “lame brat”. There can't be many only children who hear a school friend say 'your mother is a fool' and reply 'I know it'<sup>1</sup>. I think that the most important determinant of his attitude to women was his mother who lived only for him but was difficult, crude, possessive, and unpredictable. – “Mrs. Byron Furiosa”<sup>2</sup> His father was absent, and had died when Byron was two and a half years' old. Byron's nursemaids, the Gray sisters, were a nightmare, one exhorting him in Calvin's theology on a daily basis, the other, according to some opinion, sexually abusing him frequently when the young Byron was entrusted to her care. The Calvinist teachings brought him melancholy all his life, which he perhaps tried to assuage by a robust engagement with women sexually emotionally and intellectually. This theory of being a victim of early sexual abuse goes a long way to explain Byron's melancholy, his longing for and need for human company, tempered with his vacuous boredom and his own mood swings. As any psychologist worth his or her salt will tell you, Byron's life was bound to be dysfunctional<sup>3</sup>. Especially his sex life, noted for its inexhaustible variety. But it did have its compensations in the form of his verse, where he makes graceful arabesques of thought, high risk emotional high wire stunts of comedy,

parody and witty burlesques.

There is a view of Byron, as a gay icon, only interested in men, which has dominated the Byron discourse of our day, most notably in the 2002 biography by Fiona McCarthy, and more recently, (July 26 and August 2, 2009) in Channel 4's "The Scandalous Adventures of Byron". From the presenter, Rupert Everett's point of view, Byron not only disliked women, but all his relationships with them were somehow false, unreal, and unimportant.

We could ask, from the evidence we have, whether Byron was also attracted to women, or was bisexual, and had important relationships with both sexes. Of course, it is difficult to go back a couple of hundred years with a modern agenda, but that is what is happening to reputations in our day, which indeed is a celebrity culture, with the lowest common denominator to the fore. So this paper looks on the question from another point of view – balance.

We know from the evidence that Byron liked women, and the wonder is, with such a difficult mother, that he liked women at all – yet his life history is peppered with encounters, friendships, romantic love and sexual amours with women so numerous that they are beyond counting. So far from being a misogynist, and predominantly homosexual as Fiona McCarthy has argued in her biography "Byron: Life and Legend," Byron sought to find fulfillment through all the permutations and vagaries with the opposite sex, as lover and friend.

If we on the other hand, could accuse Byron of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sin of sexism, we find no evidence that Byron was essentially against the idea of women, particularly against the education and liberation of women, to label him sexist. But did he take on women as his equals? This would be a very unusual notion in his day, or otherwise Mary Wollstonecraft would not have presumed a surprised and unconvinced readership for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to evidence this point.

We will begin with Byron as a love poet. As Margaret Drabble, the novelist, observes, "Libertines write the best love songs – Byron or Burns, those faithless lovers and shameless womanizers have long been recognized as problematic figures by female critics."<sup>4</sup>

But as to whether Byron really liked women, would we judge a male poet these days on how he was on the question of equality for women? Some women writers have. Romance and equality do not always go hand in hand. It is unlikely that Byron would not begin where most modern people begin – with an assumption that equality is a necessary and primary value in politics or in relationships. However, his attitude to others was humanitarian, approaching egalitarian – he was affectionate with his servants and loved by them<sup>5</sup>, paying an allowance for a baby whose mother was a servant and which might have been his, and in another case, paying release from conscription in Venice. His first speech in the House of Lords, on the frame breakers and the threat to livelihoods, showed that he had ideals for justice uncommon for his aristocratic background. However, love, justice and equality do not always go hand in hand, even in our political correct era. But certainly there is evidence that he strived to be just to others, including women.

Bernard Beatty, in correspondence with the author of this paper, makes the point that equality with women did not really exist in Regency England (half a century later both Tennyson and Gilbert and Sullivan take for granted that they can get a laugh out of the idea of women at university, and this laugh would be shared by a lot of women)—“so almost everyone in regency England except self-conscious feminists like Shelley (but not his wife Mary, who was suspicious of progress) and Mary Wollstonecraft—would be regarded as sexist by us.”

One of the things that is obvious and most interesting about Byron is his awareness of the contradictoriness of human behaviour and understanding (why he admired Pope and Montaigne who also insisted on this). So what seems more interesting is not whether we can or cannot tick the box 'misogynist' or 'feminist' for Byron as though the label would catch him—to try to do this would be to think in a very un-Byronic way—but rather catch or try to catch the interrelations between different attitudes. Thus Byron often mocks the idea and fact of intellectual women -blue-stockings—in the Blues and the Waltz, portraits of his wife, praise of harem societies, for example.

So it is not straightforward at all. If Byron at times despised intellectual women and liked 'female animals' like Margarita Cogni, in crucial matters actually sought out intellectual women as his closest confidantes, and friends. He married Annabella, a gifted mathematician (but not emotionally intelligent). His first important relationship with a woman was with Lady Caroline Lamb, who played intellectual games and dressed up in her pageboy's uniforms. At the end of his life, his most sustained relationship was with a woman scholar, Teresa Guiccioli. He also read and admired female writers (Joanna Baillie, Mme de Stael). So in this sense, he liked relationships with women which approached intellectual equality, though at times he varied in his treatment of women. What he did was to react with and against them, so they are not the passive heroines of popular culture but women gifted with spirit and imagination. In our age of political correctness, when equality has been confused with the idea of being identical, we may find it hard to understand the complexity of relationships in a previous age which itself had traditions and antecedents as well as contemporary trends.

Byron was born at a propitious time for intellectual men, in the very eve of the greatest social revolution the world had known, the French Revolution, famous for its thinkers, and its activists, and came of age at a time of great political ferment, when these extreme ideas had been tested and tried, leading to new solutions of age-old inequalities, the ideas of brotherhood and equality for men – but not explicitly, for women. Byron seems ambiguous about these new developments in general, and as regards women and equality, he grew up in an age which had honoured in its recent past the intellectual qualities of women, namely the Blue Stocking movement. This movement to do with the emancipation of women had already taken place in the half century before the French revolution, and before Byron was born, and that many of the women he met while a young man in England were accomplished, widely read, and intellectually adventurous<sup>6</sup>.

However, because the movement was not organized along political lines, it was moribund by the time of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, which book really did not have its apogee until the final

decades of the 20th century. Wollstonecraft proposed the deliberate extrapolation of Enlightenment ideals to include education for women, whose rational natures she believed were no less capable of intellectual pursuits than those of men. This appeal to reason seems to have been a reaction to the overt feminism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century which emphasized sensibility and made women a universal model. Women were now looking to men as role models. The Della Crusicans, who praised exaggerated sensibility and were thought feminine, considered themselves as intellectuals as well. Commentators are familiar with arguments that the 18<sup>th</sup> century sees a steady increase in the feminization of women and their association overwhelmingly with sensibility which reversed what happened in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when women (see Restoration comedy) were more mannish in wit and overtly sexual. So what is the true sounding board? Often these changes were brought about by novel reading, particularly since social mobility was on the rise, and the middle classes were being absorbed in some measure into the aristocracy. Reading novels pushed away social barriers and distinctions by making them imaginative, and thus able to be played upon both by writers and their readers. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century women themselves became authors on a grand scale, mostly of novels, and by the time of Jane Austen, who wrote her novels while Byron published his poetry, relations between the sexes were the subject of much discourse, *Sense and Sensibility* being a very typical example of this fluidity, which existed alongside extreme courtesy and harsh economic reality – women as yet could not earn their own living. The Della Crusicans were notorious for having an exaggerated form of sensibility which played up the supposedly feminine characteristics such as copious weeping – so Byron’s masculine persona and Austen’s irony were a reflection of what was an extremely complex and interesting time for both men and women. Byron had no time for the stereotypes of the day and attacked the Della Crusicans in “English Bards and Scotch reviewers”, even though some commentators, such as McGann<sup>7</sup>, on Byron’s early poetry criticize it for this very reason.

So this brings us to the essential quality of Byron’s poetry, that in his mind he held two contrarities, and his work was in dialogue with those movements of the day, but more particularly not

with abstractions but the human qualities of both his protagonists and his readers.

Though he engaged on the intellectual level with many women, our own culture today, particularly feminism, finds it problematic that relations between the sexes are indeed more complex than the politically correct view. To go back to the mother of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, her campaign for women as being as rational as men was fundamental to her philosophy and her work yet Mary Wollstonecraft ended up yielding to social pressure by marrying William Godwin,

Byron also exemplifies a paradox of our age: that it, it simultaneously celebrates love and romance while castigating its proponents in the lurid popular press: indeed our age is the age of the double think. It is remarkable that it is Western democratic culture that is exhibiting this feature rather than the socialist countries which Orwell was writing about in *1984*. Along with the cult of celebrity, its aim is to dumb down and simplify.

Our age portrays women as free, touting female achievement and independence, while society does not help them to realize their biological destinies due to difficult conditions for mothers in the workplace. Recently the “Observer” (August 9, 2009) newspaper ran a feature focusing on this aspect of women and fertility. This was taken for granted in the age of Byron, where contraceptives were not yet invented. But this did not impede his romantic quests for relationships with women, who often happened to be mothers, such Lady Oxford famously having five offspring dubbed by London wits as the “Harleian Miscellany”.<sup>8</sup>

Having been born into a turbulent age, Byron himself mirrored many of its contradictions, which are still with us. We all profess to be egalitarians and democrats yet we simultaneously buy in huge numbers celebrity magazines and news stories of exceptional people, usually rich. Indeed, *The Sunday Times* carried a review of the Everett/Byron programme with a masthead looking very similar, very comically, to “Hello!” magazine..

However, some of the ideals of the movement for women intellectuals survived, in that the women to whom Byron wrote poems were often themselves educated. His first volume contains

seventeen poems about or dedicated to women.

But the question returns- can we equate romantic aspiration with ideals of equality?. Did Byron love women as his equals? It is notoriously difficult to evaluate romantic relationships in terms of equality, the affections do lead us on to positions from superiority to dependency, even in the most robust of equal relationship there tends to be a power struggle of sorts, so that the slave to love who pens the poems often ends up master both of the muse and the art. Or the muse becomes a tyrant of the poet's imagination, or sometimes a tyrant in his household. It is a bit like the tango, when the passive partner controls the flow of the dance.

Certainly Byron harboured feelings of love towards people of the same sex, as Fiona McCarthy illustrates in her biography – as almost everyone does at some adolescent stage - the question remains only a journalistic over-simplification in McCarthy's book because she is trying to put just one point across. But the biographical facts seem to suggest that Byron only sought sexual encounters with males when women were not around, such as the time he was at Harrow, when he had friendships with erotic tinges, and later, when as a young man he found himself in societies where women were not heard and seldom seen - harems such as in Turkey on Byron's first travels at the age of twenty-one, and the time of his last days with Loukas, when he was preparing for war.

Despite evidence of homoeroticism, acknowledged as a difficult question due to the punitive laws of those days, and the quarrel on this subject with his contemporaries and critics such as Moore<sup>9</sup> - we cannot put down all Byron's verses to women as a literary convention obscuring his real feelings, for he expressed his feelings very plainly and clearly at times.

Byron's habitual honesty about his sexual and emotional relationships have left us perhaps with a more reliable picture of how it was for him. One thing is sure, that he did love particular women, naming them, dedicating his work to them.

There is evidence also, that not only did Byron have very many romantic relationships, he also had friendships of an enduring kind with various women. There is no doubt that he highly valued these

friendships, Elizabeth Piggott was an important friend, particularly in his early years and his letters to women, such as Elizabeth Piggott, Teresa, Annabella his wife, Caroline Lamb, Lady Melbourne, his affair with the intelligent and cultivated Lady Oxford, and his conversations with Lady Blessington, all this points to the fact that, apart from the romantic poems, Byron did in fact take women seriously, and whether or not he took them as his equals would have to depend on how much he valued differences in personality, as the person always comes first with him. His letters and his life shows that Byron, of all the women he knew, and he knew many, actively sought women with whom he could have an equal intellectual relationship, and invariably chose well educated women to be his confidantes. He also was an avid reader of books authored by women, and in a letter, in a tone of intense admiration to Lady Melbourne, 6 September 1813, he speaks positively of the woman dramatist Joanna Baillie “Nothing would delight me more than the acquaintanceship of that lady who does not possess a more enthusiastic admirer than myself – she is our only dramatist since Otway and Southern, I don’t except Hume”<sup>10</sup> (a dramatist and one time tutor to the Prince of Wales).

Jane Austen, Mme de Stael, Elizabeth Gaskell, Maria Edgeworth, Lady Jersey, were all highly intelligent women and influential writers but they do not fit readily into the Blue Stocking movement, or with the rationalist agenda of Mary Wollstonecraft which has inspired modern feminists. Because the spheres men and women were more social than academic, their intellectual credentials as authors in a society noted for its frippery and feminization speaks loudly of women’s universal capacities to exercise rights and authority in any situation, but there is not a clear picture that accomplished women writers shared the preoccupations and agenda of modern feminists – or their relations with men as existed on a quantifying or qualifying scale in a convenient category.

If we are to look at, then, at the larger pattern in Byron’s life, despite an unpropitious start with a mother who was a hysteric and a bully, we find on the whole that women were of central importance to him, not as some sort of front for his “real” sexual inclinations but because he liked them in a much broader sense, both sexually and emotionally Despite his sometimes misogynist bravura about female



inferiority, his major life-long bonds and friendships with women were on an essentially equal footing and this is clearly reflected in his verse. Haidée has more presence and more authority than Juan, for example. His great love was for Augusta, his half-sister, and his “solitary star” who was his confidante and true love from the time they met when Byron was fifteen, and she twenty. There is every evidence in his words that he regarded her truly as his equal, just as Manfred thought that Astarte was. It is true that Byron used childhood words with Augusta (perhaps, in part that they had been deprived of a childhood together) and she represented both family and its negation of it. We could not imagine Manfred being childish in this way, but Augusta had the same blood and rank as he and had a more genteel upbringing. It is helpful to remember that Byron was not brought up with Augusta, and thus when they met they were virtual strangers to each other. This is crucial in an evaluation of their relationship, Edward Westermarck<sup>11</sup> having demonstrated that siblings reared in different households do not behave as brother and sister always, as pairing bonds only work when creatures are not reared together.

Like many young men of his class, the young Byron’s first exploits suggest that he could love quite indiscriminately, and not without passion, servants, prostitutes, and actors – this somewhat dysfunctional pattern recurs from time to time, as when he first inhabits Venice, but in the end, he always gravitated to intelligent cultured women – as his literary heroines testify, Haidee, and the bookish Aurora Raby, while Myrra and Adah are intelligent, and Adeline bright and foolish. It is true that he also features women who were not especially clever, Dudu, Neuha, and who seem to be drawn in deliberate contrast to this clever heroines – Caroline Franklin’s *Byron’s Heroines* helpfully sets out and analyses the great variety of his responses to women, both intellectually and emotionally<sup>12</sup>.

In relation to Byron and women, there is also the charge of female fandom: the John Murray archive contains a collection of adoring letters from women of all classes – enough to fill a volume. “That beautiful pale face is my fate”, was the histrionic entry in the diary of Lady Caroline Lamb, when she first laid eyes on Byron, voicing the rapturous adoration of the age. She later wrote a rather spiteful account of the relationship in her novel *Glenarvon*.

In the new biography of Lady Caroline Lamb, by Paul Douglas in 2004<sup>13</sup> we learn that Caroline was gifted and educated. Her governess was Miss Selina Trimmer, the daughter of Mrs Sarah Trimmer, a well-known and respected author of moral tales for children, whose school is alluded to in *Don Juan*. Byron’s poetic pose immediately won Caroline’s heart. It was on the intellectual plane there were more harmonious with each other, but it was clearly her playful spirit that initially captivated him. However, Byron was not able to sustain a sexual relationship with her, as she became too intense, even sending him a lock of her pubic hair, and stealing his portrait. We might accuse him of misogyny in relation to intellectually brilliant women, were it not for his pursuit of the very educated Annabella.

When Byron decided he wanted to marry, he could have chosen from a very wide range of women friends and acquaintances, from actresses to maidservants (one of whom with he had a child) and heiresses. Unlike some of our celebrity men these who choose women not renowned for their cerebral accomplishments, or even their beauty, Byron was looking for a woman of substance not only materially but in accomplishment as well. He chose above all the others a woman who had a reputation for accomplishment: Annabella Milbanke. She was also an heiress which would help him to preserve his estates.

That he took her seriously in this vein, and looked upon her as a possible inspiration is abundantly clear from his letters. Bernard Beatty has suggested that Byron seems to have liked Annabella's coolness and moral self-confidence as a corrective to his own disposition as well as her intelligence as such (mathematically she was intelligent, but emotionally not so). He also may have been attracted to her because he thought that she resisted him in the sort of being she was and that she could be awakened sexually by him—but he was also looking for a soul-mate. To her, in letters written just before the wedding<sup>14</sup>, he confided his deepest hopes and fears. He wrote to her affectingly of his temperament, and his seeking of sensation, because John Locke had been such an influence on him, he was hoping her sheer intelligence and her moral probity would provide a beacon for him. There is no element of sincerity lacking here. Annabella as well as being of first reader of Byron's poetry also composed poetry herself. It is true that at times she worked as his amanuensis, and duly noted that he had the superior gift as a poet, but this acknowledgement could have occurred in friendship between Byron and a man friend and is not necessarily linked to sexual relationship.

The relationship and marriage foundered for reasons nothing to do with Annabella's intellectual gifts which had brought them together, it was rather that the marriage had been delayed, with disastrous consequences. It is all very complicated of course, what attracted each to each was their balancing difference, but Byron's patent insecurity and his headlong rush into his relationship with his half-sister had severe consequences for his marriage. He had embarked on it too late and was already in deep doubt as he came to Seaham or the wedding ceremony. On the night of his marriage he believed himself to be in hell when he saw a red curtain.

Here Annabella was no use at all, because her intellectual qualities and lack of experience meant she had no way of dealing with him except for a pious logic, which was in contrast to his irreverent view of the world. The mathematical quality of her reasoning soon became farcical and inadequate to the grave situation they found themselves in, there were definitely three in this marriage.

The main factor was that Byron had allowed almost two years to elapse before becoming engaged to Annabella, and it was during these two years that Byron made a fatal mistake and fell into temptation with his half-sister Augusta. Indeed, he reproves Annabella for the delay, when making a confession of abominable sins, whereas had she acted promptly, he might have been saved from this destruction.

The intellectual cast of Annabella's mind—logical and therefore incapable of holding two contraries together (what Bernard Beatty has defined as Byron's permanent position and directly linked to his poetry) was also a definite factor in the estrangement – her poetry has been called abysmal by some critics.

However, there is no evidence at the time of her relationship and marriage to Byron that she was seriously mocked at or made fun of because of her gifts, which were quite different to Byron's being logical and mathematical, (which she passed on to her daughter, Ada) while Byron was capable of holding opposing views and feelings, she was not. They had nothing to talk about, very little in common. Curiously it was the religious and moral divide between them that was a bond—they talked across it intelligently, and there was clearly physical attraction (again based on opposition). There could eventually have been a meeting or sharing of minds were it not for the exposure to scandal which had occurred because of Byron and his half-sister.

There is no doubt that the earlier recognition of women's abilities had some legacy in the lives of women of the upper echelons of society, however diffused, this gave them the confidence and ability to be friends with the intellectual young men of the day, and particularly so in the case of Byron. Since the salon model of 17<sup>th</sup> century France (originally begun by women to counter the boorishness of male behaviour (they hunted and fought and not much else in Louis XIII's France) became absolutely dominant and produced the cultured world of Louis XIV's court which continued as the admired model well into the next century— produced the idea of aristocratic women talking intelligently to aristocrats— and depended upon the differentiation of the sexes and the idea that they can learn from one another without being wholly assimilated to one another.

Therefore, I would conclude that Byron was not afraid of intellectual women but was attracted to them. His marriage failed because of bad timing and the unfortunate taking up of a too intimate relationship with Augusta, something that Annabella pursued to the end. The previous relationship between Lady Caroline Lamb and Byron foundered on the fact that it became obsessive sexually for both of them, initially he, then she in her pursuit. He could not abide women who pursued him. I would look for confirmation of my theory at another relationship, Byron's with Claire Clairmont. Clairmont had hopes of becoming a writer or an actress and wrote to Byron asking for "career advice" in March 1816, when she was almost eighteen. Byron at that time was a director at the Drury Lane Theatre. . Claire Clairmont later followed up her letters with visits, sometimes with her stepsister Mary Shelley, whom she seemed to suggest Byron might also find attractive. "Do you know I cannot talk to you when I see you? I am so awkward and only feel inclined to take a little stool and sit at your feet," Clairmont wrote to Byron<sup>15</sup>. She "bombardeed him with passionate daily communiqés" telling him he need only accept "that which it has long been the passionate wish of my heart to give you.". Therefore, we can deduce from Byron's affairs with Lady Caroline Lamb and with Claire Clairmont that Byron detested being pursued: and because that attraction is expressed in physical terms in a man, it may have put him off sexually.

His great need for intellectual and emotional freedom overrode all considerations and is one cause among many of his notorious promiscuity.

But we would have to dig a little deeper than the author of *Glenarvon* would allow, and look into his intellectual and social background to see whether Byron was a cultivated misogynist, especially at the end of his life, when some of his exploits were beginning to weary him, and he spoke of emotional exhaustion as he confided to Lady Blessington in Italy<sup>16</sup>.

However, this was the time towards the end of his life, we know there was a profound change in Byron – he was able to continue and sustain a relationship with a woman, who was a scholar and intellectual, the Countess Teresa Guiccioli. It was also a fruitful relationship for his poetry - he wrote three cantos of *Don Juan*, a satirical romance, *the Prophecy of Dante*, and four poetic dramas when he was with her as her cavalier serviente. Many of his love letters to her survive, and she herself wrote a narrative of her time in Italy with Byron, which shows us at the time that women could be both intellectually accomplished and attractive to Byron.

Paradoxically, this was the time Byron was most satirical about educated women, one in particular, Annabella Milbanke. In the first cantos of *Don Juan*, there is no doubt an attempt to make fun of his separated wife. That it was a caricature of Annabella was plain to his contemporaries, to those who knew him. As Fiona McCarthy puts it in her biography:

“The problems in *Don Juan* that most exercised his friends were, first and foremost, Byron’s portrait of Juan’s mother, the bluestocking Donna Inez, all too easily recognizable as Lady Byron in her prim dimity dresses: ‘dimity rhyming very comically to sublimity’, as Tom Moore pointed out<sup>17</sup>.

The conclusion of one stanza, ‘I hate a dumpy woman’, seemed particularly cruel.”

Canto 1, *Don Juan* is quite hilarious, is weighted against intellectual women, and readers might find them funny but be dismayed that they did so, concluding the sardonic litany of Dona Inez qualities (Stanza XVIII) with:

*Oh she was perfect past parallel*

(an obvious reference to Annabella, his “Princess of Parallelograms”)

*Insipid in this naughty world of ours,*

*Where our first parents never learned to kiss*

*Till they were exiled from their earlier bowers*

*Where all was peace, and innocence and bliss*

Byron lost, through the savage caricature, his faithful female readers which had made up so much of his popularity. Parents of young girls were especially concerned to keep the book out of the hands of their daughters, much of the scandal attaching to Don Juan was the way Byron had depicted women as sexually voracious, taking the initiative, just as Caroline and Claire had done.

Although the stanzas in Part One of Don Juan about the female corporation and the learning of women are hilarious, but not commensurate with the many letters Byron wrote to women, especially his women confidantes, there we see his emotional vulnerability, his readiness to pursue love, and, notably and particularly, his honesty. The fact that he sought intelligent women to be his friends and lovers is indicative of a temperament founded on human equality, and though we laugh at Byron's catalogue of learned scholars, we also share in the pain of his rejection as a man. But in the Cantos, the portrayal of the corporation of learned women functions most of all as a dramatic device. We perceive behind the comedic scenes a very wounded spirit of the poet. But we cannot read the poem as autobiography, though as noted, it has autobiographical elements.

The part of Don Juan is also a caricature. In our time, it has become usual to try and find the reality of the author and his life behind every line, and we can rush to judgment. Can a man who is such a philanderer and a womanizer be truly a friend to women, the friend that Wordsworth described to his ladies? Byron thought Wordsworth and Southey the vainest most intolerant of men, but that doesn't mean that they had the monopoly on virtue. Byron's exemplary honesty in his letters, and his dramatizing of his life in his poems, does shed some light, and perhaps illustrates some of his own experience of personal rejection by his wife, whom he finally described as a virtuous monster.

The treatment of Adeline in the last canto of Don Juan is also laconically and wickedly funny,

and again it might illustrate that towards the end of his life Byron had judged women to be the unfair sex. However, the litmus test for sexism is the question of rape, and some feminist critics have expressed dismay that Byron made fun of a rape during a battle – and for this he is deemed to be sexist. However, I would like to point out that Byron was even more darkly facetious on the question of men's behaviour in wartime with each other. The rape scene is conducted in the dark, so Byron does not provide us with vicarious entertainment – he merely takes a crack at older women, and at virginity, in what would be a typical reaction of a male until the present times when we are more cognizant with victim impact studies which highlight the gravity of rape.

Byron did write comic verses about women as a form of entertainment: however, that they were taken seriously is indicative of the serious content they had for his readers. It seems that society at that time was ambivalent on women with intelligence, and that some women did suffer from the stereotyping of sexual scandal and the lampooning of female achievement, particularly with the advent of Victorianism in later days.

So the questions have not gone away. At one time bidden only to the bed and the nursery, and the kitchen, women have achieved economic and social independence, based on the firm foundation of their talents and education. But there is another powerful school of thought that resists educating women, and this is the key area of conflict between certain societies today, between the western liberal democracies, who still make it hard for women to have children, though it does admit them to careers – and the countries of Islam, who do not believe in the equality of women and some sects of which have a particular animus against educating them. This hatred of intellectual women or women of intelligence, strangely enough is one of the dividing beliefs in our day, that lies behind the veil of Islamic terrorism and its assault on western democratic values, which has caused our world to become anxious and fearful.



Although we can hardly exonerate Byron for his splenetic attacks on Lady Byron's learning and intelligence, we find a diametrically opposed position in *Beppo*, which Byron had written on commencement of his last great amour, Countess Teresa Guiccioli, there is also comedic device to portray women of intelligence, but here the partiality is all on their side. There is a soft, sweet gentle, and the only sharp word is on mathematics, even so, the jest is not so painful.

There is no doubt that Byron, in these stanzas, is appealing to justice, to enlightenment ideals for these women, and that he himself, through his friendships with educated women, left accounts of them which are sympathetic, kind, supportive, emotional, even dependent on them.

I have examined Byron's works and reputation somewhat unfairly in asking whether not he was sexist, which is the great sin of our times, but which philosophy had not enlightened his own age in a general sense. In this respect, Byron was a man of his times, but not a seriously offensive male sexist, as shown throughout his life. Women were his closest confidantes, to them, and to them alone, he expressed his inadequacies. His close friendship with Lady Blessington at the end of his life showed him at his frankest and most disarming, confessing freely to her that he brought doom to those he loved

However, recent programmes have brought into public knowledge that after his death, not only was Byron's body preserved to a remarkable degree, but that the sexual organ was full and erect. It would be interesting to speculate whether his oft-commented upon and profligate sexual adventures were in fact the result of a medical condition, for example, a rare form of priapism. Future research on this subject will no doubt provide answers. It is important that biographical detail about Byron is balanced, and should not make a cause for conflicts in gender and sex theories and wars.

In the meantime, we are fortunate to have and appreciate his work for a fine balance, when at times his life and activity seemed unbalanced. It is in this balance, in his graceful arabesques of thought, that he wrought delicious comedy, as well as delighting us, brings us to serious thought most

of the time, particularly, at this time.

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This is an updated version of a paper presented to the 34<sup>th</sup> International Byron Conference, 2008 in St. Andrew's University, Scotland on "Byron and Serious Laughater", and the author in this revised version acknowledges a debt to Professor Bernard Beatty for his overview, particularly his insights on the mores between men and women from the Enlightenment and Romantic eras.

<sup>1</sup> Fiona MacCarthy *Byron, Life and Legend*, John Murray 2002 ISBN 0-7195-5621x, p.25, quoting Moore

<sup>2</sup> Ibid from letter to John Pigot, 9 August. 1806, quoted .p. 53

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Eliot (Ed.) *The Ultimate Taboo – Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, , Longman Green, UK 1993 ISBN 0 582 21497 – 1

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Drabble, *The Sea Lady*, Penguin Books, 2007 ISBN 9780141027456

<sup>5</sup> MacCarthy. *Byron*, 7, 337

<sup>6</sup> See Wikipedia, and also recent book by Jane Robinson *Bluestockings: The Remarkable Story of the First Women to Fight for an Education* Viking, 2009, ISBN-13: 978-0670916849

<sup>7</sup> Jerome McGann *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). ISBN-13: 978-0521007221

<sup>8</sup> MacCarthy, *Byron*, p. 190

<sup>9</sup> MacCarthy, *Byron*, p. 40

<sup>10</sup> Leslie A. Marchand. (Ed.) *Selected letters and journals of Byron*, George Gordon Byron, Baron, 1788-1824. London : Pimlico, 1993. ISBN 0712656790

<sup>11</sup> Edward Westermarck *The Origins of Sexual Modesty*, London 1921

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Franklin *Byron's Heroines* Clarendon Press; illustrated (1 Oct 1992) 978-0198112303

<sup>13</sup> Paul Douglass (2004) *Lady Caroline Lamb: A Biography*. Palgrave Macmillan. Palgrave Macmillan; illustrated edition (2004) ISBN 978-1403966056

<sup>14</sup> Marchand, *Letters of Lord Byron*

<sup>15</sup> Benita Eisler *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. ISBN 0679412999

<sup>16</sup> MacCarthy, *Byron*. p. 454

<sup>17</sup> MacCarthy, *Byron*, p. 349