

Richard Lansdown



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Byron

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Byron*

Author of the most influential long poem of its era (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*) and the funniest long poem in European literature (*Don Juan*), Lord Byron was also the literary superstar of Romanticism, whose effect on nineteenth-century writers, artists, musicians and politicians – but also everyday readers – was second to none. His poems seduced and scandalized readers, and his life and legend were correspondingly magnetic, given added force by his early death in the Greek War of Independence. This introduction compresses his extraordinary life to manageable proportions, and gives readers a firm set of contexts in the politics, warfare and Romantic ideology of Byron's era. It offers a guide to the main themes in his wide-ranging oeuvre, from the early poems that made him famous (and infamous) overnight, to his narrative tales, dramas and the comic epic left incomplete at his death.

RICHARD LANSDOWN is Associate Professor of English at James Cook University, Cairns, Australia.

The Cambridge Introduction to Byron

RICHARD LANSDOWN

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In memory of Andrew Nicholson

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Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
<i>Map: Lord Byron's Europe</i>	xvi
Chapter 1 Life	1
Childhood, boyhood, youth (1788–1809)	1
Grand Tour and years of fame (1809–1816)	3
Exile (1816–1823)	9
To Missolonghi (1823–1824)	13
Epilogue	15
Chapter 2 Context	17
Politics and aristocracy	18
Napoleonic Europe	28
The Romantic movement	37
Chapter 3 The letters and journals	47
'This other Byron'	48
Two principles of Byronism?	50
'The absolute monarch of words'	52
'One should see every thing once'	55
Characters	57
'My own wretched identity'	60
Chapter 4 The poet as pilgrim	63
Early starts, true and false	65

Form and function	69
Prospects of Europe	71
Newstead to Athens	72
Waterloo to Geneva	75
Venice to Rome	76
Chapter 5 The orient and the outcast	80
The Aegean matrix	83
‘The Scorpion girt by fire’	87
<i>The Giaour</i>	90
<i>Manfred</i>	94
Chapter 6 Four philosophical tales	97
A cell: <i>The Prisoner of Chillon</i>	98
A society: <i>Beppo</i>	101
A psyche: <i>Mazeppa</i>	105
A culture: <i>The Island</i>	109
Chapter 7 Histories and mysteries	112
Three neoclassical dramas	113
Three mysteries	122
<i>The Deformed Transformed</i>	126
Chapter 8 Don Juan	129
Style and origins	130
Vision and attitude	137
An alternative vision	144
Chapter 9 Afterword	148
Art and music	149
Literature	151
Politics and philosophy	154
<i>Notes</i>	160
<i>Further reading</i>	168
<i>Index</i>	171

Figure and tables

Figure

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| 1 Byron's manuscript of <i>Don Juan</i> , Canto VII, 385–403 | <i>page</i> 132 |
|--|-----------------|

Tables

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1 The itinerary of Byron's Grand Tour (1809–11) | 4 |
| 2 Dates of composition and publication of Byron's major poems | 64 |
| 3 Additions to <i>The Giaour</i> , taken from the manuscript to the final edition | 91 |

Preface

Ever since his first appearance in print, Byron has made an impression on his readers as a personality as well as a source of linguistic expression. ‘There is ... a tone of self-willed independence and originality about the whole composition,’ the critic Francis Jeffrey wrote of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in 1812, ‘a certain plain manliness and strength of manner, which is infinitely refreshing after the sickly affectations of so many modern writers.’¹

As often as not, therefore, his readers and acquaintances have assessed Byron in morally as well as aesthetically evaluative terms. A British resident in Constantinople wrote of meeting Byron in 1810, long before his years of fame, that ‘there was that irresistible attraction in his manner, of which those who have had the good luck to be admitted into his intimacy, can alone have felt the power.’² An Armenian priest in Venice, with whom Byron briefly worked on a grammar of that language in 1816, recalled him as ‘a young man quick, sociable, with burning eyes.’³ A few months before the poet died, another priest – this time a Scottish evangelical one – testified to the indivisibility of life and art in his case. ‘In the course of the day,’ James Kennedy wrote,

He might become the most morose, and the most gay; the most melancholy, and the most frolicsome; the most generous, and the most penurious; the most benevolent, and the most misanthropic; the most rational, and the most childish; the most sublime and elevated in thought, and the most frivolous or trivial; the most gentle being in existence, and the most irascible. His works bear the stamp of his character, and *Childe Harold* is no less faithful a picture of him at one part of the day, than *Don Juan* is at another.⁴

We can assume that Kennedy was not thinking simply of the heroes of those two poems as emanations of Byron’s nature, but of the two poems themselves as different projections of the same, complex individual.

‘No man ever lived who had such devoted friends,’ his best friend John Cam Hobhouse recalled of Byron. ‘His power of attaching those about him was such as no one I ever knew possessed. No human being could approach him

without being sensible of this magical influence.' 'The affection felt for him,' Hobhouse concluded – in a most unusual turn of phrase for one nineteenth-century Englishman to use of another – 'was as that for a favourite and somewhat froward sister.'⁵ But the critic Matthew Arnold (who did not know Byron at first hand) came to a quite different conclusion regarding his personal qualities. 'We talk of Byron's *personality*,' he wrote; 'but can we not be a little more circumstantial, and name that in which the wonderful power of this personality consisted?' Arnold then famously borrowed the poet Algernon Swinburne's assessment (itself reminiscent of Jeffrey's) of 'the splendid and imperishable excellence which covers all his offences and outweighs all his defects: *the excellence of sincerity and strength*.'⁶ Like a favourite but naughty sister, or like an epitome of manly sincerity? Only an unusual individual could leave two such contrasting impressions.

Byron's influence is a matter of the force of his example and personality as much as his writings, therefore. The two were difficult for nineteenth-century people to separate – nor did they try. It is small wonder, then, that Byron's stock fell sharply between the 1920s and the 1970s, when various schools of Anglophone literary criticism operated under T. S. Eliot's dictum (from his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent') that 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.'⁷ As Byron had apparently failed to make that separation, he fell from favour as poet and personality alike.

Modernists like Eliot did not hold the Romantic group of writers in particularly high esteem anyway; but even as a Romantic Byron seemed to some twentieth-century readers like an interloper or an anomaly. He did not possess Blake's elaborate private symbology, for example, or Coleridge's theoretical sophistication, or Wordsworth's moral sublimity, or Shelley's political radicalism, or Keats's pronounced degree of aesthetic self-consciousness. But gradually and steadily since the Second World War – and largely due to the biographical and editorial efforts of American scholars Leslie Marchand and Jerome McGann – Byron's reputation has risen, and his place among his poetic peers is now assured. Indeed, nowadays his writings can and frequently do serve as a standard by which to measure those of other poets – a reverse of the situation as it stood for much of the twentieth century, when Byron was castigated for being insufficiently Wordsworthian or Keatsian in some respect or other. It was a brave but also a prescient critic who wrote in 1923 that 'What is important is that Byron's poetry is alive; so full of life indeed that it threatens other more dignified sorts of poetry.'⁸ So it does. The life his poetry manifests is something with which we are still only beginning to come to terms, 200 years after it was first published.

Byron has often been seen as a more lucid and less complex poet than his five great peers. But coming to an understanding of him – as his nineteenth-century readers often understood better than his twentieth-century ones – is not just a matter of understanding what he has said. ‘You cannot find out what a man means’, the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood argued, ‘by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.’⁹ The more light we shed on the questions Byron carried with him, the more we will shed on the life his writings manifest, and this study seeks to discover at least a few of the questions Byron had in his mind and presumed to be in ours. Still: his creativity is very diverse, even by the standards of his fellow Romantic poets, and in the interest of providing a clear outline of what is central to it, some parts of Byron’s work – particularly his lyrical and satirical poems – suffer neglect here, for which I apologise.

Apart from the dedicatee, I would like to acknowledge the support of my family, near and far, and the continued critical excellence of Dan Jacobson and Peter Pierce, who brought their knowledge and experience to bear throughout. A research grant from the School of Arts and Social Sciences at James Cook University was invaluable. Thanks also to Linda Bree and the rest of the team at Cambridge University Press.