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Paul Douglass  
San Jose State University, Paul.Douglass@sjsu.edu

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What Lord Byron Learned from Lady Caroline Lamb

Perhaps the quintessential moment in the career of that notorious erotomaniac known as Lady Caroline Lamb is her famous bonfire scene. After Byron ended their affair in November 1812, she wrote: “You have told me how foreign women revenge; I will show you how an Englishwoman can.” Gratified as much as annoyed, Byron wrote to Caroline’s mother-in-law, Lady Melbourne, that he thought “perhaps in the year 1820 your little Medea may relapse into a milder tone.” He knew better.

Revenge came shortly before Christmas when Caroline organized a bonfire ritual in the village of Welwyn, not far from Brocket Hall, her favorite place in the world. She arranged for village girls to dance while she set Byron’s effigy ablaze. As they danced, they tossed onto the flames copies of Byron’s letters and gifts to Caroline. For the occasion, Lady Caroline composed a poem:

Burn, fire, burn, while wondering boys exclaim,
And gold and trinkets glitter in the flame.
Ah, look not thus on me, so grave, so sad,
Shake not your heads, nor say the lady’s mad.

London, farewell; vain world, vain life, adieu!
Take the last tears I e’er shall shed for you.
Young tho’ I seem, I leave the world for ever,
Never to enter it again; no, never, never!

Caroline had fallen in love with Byron’s Childe Harold the previous March. The poem’s picture of a youth “sore sick at heart,” had seduced Caroline, and she had tried to comfort the young author who professed (through Harold) that “none did love him.” Byron had almost eloped with her in July. But in the fall he had told her their affair was over, and now she had realized that Harold spoke true when he said that “maidens, like moths, are ever caught by glare,” and “[l]ove has no gift so grateful as his wings.” Now she had realized that Childe Harold was a trap.

The female figures of the poem are erotic fantasies. They inspire Harold with their beauty, but never disrupt the hero’s narcissism. In “To Inez,” a poem within the poem of Childe Harold, the speaker says he is “curst” with memory, “And all my solace is to know, / What e’er betides, I’ve known the worst.” Inez gets no speaking lines as Harold continues,

What is the worst? Nay do not ask--
In pity from the search forebear:
Smile on--nor venture to unmask
Man’s heart, and view the Hell that’s there.

Women of exotic lands are lovely to Harold, so long as they just keep smiling. They are to live in harems, and their voices are “never heard.” They are, in short, “Tam’d to [their] cage[s].” Harold’s women get explicit directions for their behavior: “I love the fair face of the maid in her youth, / Her caresses shall lull me, her music shall sooth.” Caroline had bought this, but now she revolted against the poet who had inspired her passion. In honor of the ritual burning, Caroline’s pages and footmen sported buttons on their livery.
imprinted with a satire of Byron’s family motto: “Ne Crede Biron.” In escaping one trap, however, she tumbled into another.

Burning her lover in effigy publicly in the Christmas cold, she spoke the line, “Shake not your heads, nor say the lady’s mad.” Naturally she feared being labeled an erotomaniac—the bereaved and deserted woman who falls into insanity—, an established role, certainly, as Caroline knew. One of her letters to John Murray, is signed, “Ophelia.” But more apropos is the version of Monk Lewis in a popular street ballad titled “Crazy Jane”:

Gladly that young heart received him
Which never has loved but one!
He seemed true, and I believed him;
He was false, and I undone.
Since that hour has reason never
Held her empire in my brain:
Henry fled: with him for ever
Fled the wits of Crazy Jane!

Despite her exertions to avoid the role, Caroline became “Crazy Jane” from this moment on. When Byron heard about the bonfire, he pronounced her a victim of “the foul fiend Flibertigibbet.” His friend John Cam Hobhouse responded satisfactorily: “Your tale of the Brocket bonfire is almost incredible—well may you say with Horace, ‘Me Phryne macerat’ [Phryne (a whore or procuress) torments me.] adding at the same time ‘nec uno contenta’ [Not content with one man].” Thus Hobhouse painted Caroline as Byron’s ball and chain, a personification of female lust and jealousy.

Though Byron had ended their affair, he did not cut off all communication with Caroline. He continued to correspond with and even to see her occasionally during this period. When Caroline later got mixed up in the separation proceedings between wife and husband, she had to lie about when she had last seen Byron, because the date’s proximity to his wedding (which took place January 2nd, 1815), was unseemly. But as the opportunities to talk and correspond diminished, Lady Caroline began a literary dialogue with Byron. She had started a novel around the time she had burned him in effigy. In it, she capitalized upon Byron’s poetry, especially the lyrics interspersed in Childe Harold. She mastered Byron’s great talent for eloquent—and silencing—“Good-Byes,” and when Glenarvon was published three years later, she featured a classic instance in the novel’s dead center —volume 2, chapter 20—when Glenarvon sings “Farewell” to his next victim, Lady Calantha. Caroline had a talent for wicked echoes, and this lyric could not help but remind readers of Byron’s infamous poem to his now-estranged wife, “Fare Thee Well.” Her own version runs, in part:

“Farewell.”
Ah! frown not thus—nor turn from me,
I must not—dare not—look on thee;

Come give thy hand, what though we part,
Thy name is fixed, within my heart;
I shall not change, nor break the vow
I made before and plight thee now;
For since thou may’st not live for me,
’Tis sweeter far to die for thee.

“Farewell.”
Thou’lt think of me when I am gone,
None shall undo, what I have done;
Yet even thy love I would resign
To save thee from remorse like mine;
Thy tears shall fall upon my grave.
They still may bless--they cannot save. (2:191-92)

This poem appropriates a Byronic gesture not merely familiar to its contemporary audience, but absolutely indistinguishable from the notoriety of the poet. Caroline openly accused Byron of practicing “the meanest of all Arts,” extorting sympathy “by affecting to be on the point of going away from your Country or in an allarming state of Health.” She was making good on her promise to bid him “Farewell--not as you say so to your favourites or they to you--not as any Woman ever spoke that Word for they never mean it to be what I will make it--but as nuns & those who die.”

But while “Farewell” evoked “Fare Thee Well” in its title, in theme and prosody it echoes a different Byron lyric. “Maid of Athens, ere we part, / Give oh give me back my heart” is reflected in Lady Caroline’s “Come give thy hand, what though we part, / Thy name is fixed, within my heart.” The final stanza of Byron’s poem strikes a related chord: “Maid of Athens, I am gone; / Think of me, sweet! when alone.” Caroline echoes: “Thou’lt think of me when I am gone, / None shall undo, what I have done.” The connection is even stronger when we realize that Lady Caroline conscripted Isaac Nathan, who set “Maid of Athens” to music during this period, to write music for “Farewell” and then had it printed right in her novel.14

Glenarvon is filled with poetry and descriptions of music. Caroline’s verses often echo “Maid of Athens,” in which a departing lover swears his love “By that lip I long to taste, / By that zone-encircl’d waist, / By all the token-flowers that tell . . . ,” etc. Caroline’s retort (composed not long after the bonfire) substitutes “Belfont” for “Byron” and casts herself as “Biondetta” a personification of the devil in Jacques Cazotte’s novel Le diable amoureux:

By those eyes whose sweet expression
Many a deep design conceal
By those lips which preach discretion
While they other trusts reveal—
By Biondetta’s wrongs & woes
a ne crede--Belfont’s Vows.15

“By Biondetta’s wrongs & woes” echoes “Maid of Athens”: “By Love’s alternate joy and woe.” It also alludes directly to the bonfire scene by repeating the motto “ne crede. . . .” Lady Caroline had recreated Byron’s voice in a different context, one in which—as in the Duet of 1814—male and female voices clash. For this purpose she had mined Childe
Harold and his “Occasional Pieces.” She had also dug into her own correspondence and recollections of conversations with Byron for Glenarvon.

One famous letter (“I am not your lover [. . .]”) is confirmed by Leslie Marchand. There are many other passages that show Lady Caroline’s skilled use of Byron’s habitual styles of expression in print and in person. This at least was the impression of Claire Claremont, who wrote to Byron in Oct. 1816: “Some of the speeches in [Glenarvon] are yours—I am sure they are; the very impertinent way of looking in a person’s face who loves you, and telling them you are very tired and wish they’d go.”

It appears that Lady Caroline succeeded in surprising Byron—not by writing a kiss-and-tell book, but by recreating his own voice in a female register. “What--& who--the devil is ‘Glenarvon’?” Byron asked in summer 1816, not long after he had left England. Initially mystified, Byron read and enjoyed Glenarvon as a tribute to his power, though he mocked Caroline as “furious Sappho” and suggested improvements: “It seems to me that, if the authoress had written the truth, and nothing but the truth--the whole truth--the romance would not only have been more romantic, but more entertaining.” Byron’s verdict that the novel was insufficiently true confirms that it was substantially so already, and the book recurred in his conversation and letters that fall:

I read the ‘Christabel,’
Very well:
I read the ‘Missionary’;*
Pretty--very:

I read ‘Glenarvon,’ too, by Caro. Lamb--
God damn!”

Echoes of his own verse made Byron comment with amusement that Lady Caroline wrote “pretty songs, and certainly has talent.” It is quite possible that Byron considered Caroline a credible rival for literary attention, if no rival in talent. Intrigued by her transformation of his persona, he was also irked, calling her ”[A] seventy times convicted liar” to his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, on 27 Aug. 1816. Recall, though, that Byron had other reasons for distress with Caroline at this time, for he feared she might be playing a role in the public backlash against him for leaving his wife and child. Since she—the revenge artist—was in England, and he very much in exile, his suspicions were not irrational. He dramatized his hatred to reinforce the wall of silence that he wished to maintain between his half-sister and his former mistress, saying in one fit of pique that Caroline was a “monster” who “has no sex, and should live no longer.” And yet, in August 1817, Byron intervened to allow an Italian translation of Glenarvon to be published despite the local Censor’s refusal. Byron wrote his publisher that he would “never prevent or oppose the publication of any book in any language—on my own private account . . . It is going forwards in consequence.—You may say this with my compliments to the Author.” If he had wished, as he claimed, to pay Lady Caroline back for her many offenses, Byron could have torpedoed the translation. Instead, he let her know that he had personally allowed Glenarvon to be printed in Italian. He even gave a copy to his paramour, Teresa Guiccioli, who was reading it in February of 1820. She appears to have written in some consternation over the behavior of the main character, and he replied, "Your little head is heated now by that

* W. L. Bowles’s “The Missionary of the Andes (1815).
damned novel—the author of which has been—in every country and at all times—my evil Genius."  

Evil genius?  Whore?  Procuress?  Crazy Jane?  What did Byron learn from Lady Caroline Lamb?  The answer is laughter and tears.  Don Juan comically inverts gender stereotypes, and this required Byron to feminize Juan and therefore to portray women differently.  Instead of silent inspirations, they had to become more complicated and more powerful.  Byron sought to explode the feminine power he saw personified in Caroline and her mother, Lady Bessborough, her mother-in-law, Lady Melbourne, and her aunt, the Duchess of Devonshire.  These women had exercised influence through sexual liaisons, and Byron felt he had exposed "the wish of all women to exalt the sentiment of the passions--& to keep up the illusion which is their empire.  --Now D. J. strips off this illusion--and laughs at that & most other things."  Deflating laughter was Byron's weapon against the female side, where the traditional weapon was tears.

But Caroline was different.  She had studied this subject., and Glenarvon elaborated the theme of weeping from several of Byron's earlier poems, including one that described a masculine response to overpowering pain:  "From my eye flows no tear."  Caroline replied with "[m]y heart’s fit to break, yet no tear fills my eye."  And in Caroline's "Farewell" lyric, Glenarvon says to his woman:  "Thy tears shall fall upon my grave."  The instructions were given, but would they be obeyed?

In Glenarvon Byron encountered an image of himself as attractive but pretentious, and, as Caroline wrote, a manipulator who "unites the malice and petty vices of a woman, to the perfidy and villainy of a man."  When he was preparing to jilt Caroline, Byron made a show of his own "tears, which you saw & know I am not apt to shed."  Caroline had portrayed him as a feminized man, and he had embraced and elaborated this character in Don Juan.

In the conclusion of Canto 1 of Don Juan, Byron also created a masculinized woman:  It was Donna Julia, who writes, "[m]y eyeballs burn and throb, but have no tears," and the narrator underscores it:  "[S]he did not let one tear escape her."  For Byron, a woman’s teardrop "melts," while a man’s "half-sears" and must be forced from his heart.  For Byron, women employ tears to gain their ends, and their target is his alter-ego, Don Juan, who ( in a later canto) dissolves "like snow before a woman crying."  Julia’s dry eyes, however, link her to Caroline, the ungendered woman.  Byron’s affair with Lady Caroline Lamb and his reading of Glenarvon account for certain elements of his masterpiece, from the dedication, in which he tries to dissociate himself from any Glenarvon-like betrayal of Irish Patriots, to certain aphorisms on sex and marriage.  But it is Byron’s near elopement with Caroline in 1812--as revised and retold in Glenarvon--that takes shape as Don Juan’s “earliest scrape” with Julia in Canto 1.  Julia’s letter from the convent to which she has retreated at the end of the Canto is a touché for Caroline’s inclusion of Byron’s letters in her novel.  Julia’s letter begins with a benediction:  “I have no further claim on your young heart, / Mine was the victim, and would be again.”  But a reproach lies implicit in Julia’s forgiveness:

  “I loved, I love you, for this love have lost
State, station, heaven, mankind’s, my own esteem,
And yet cannot regret what it hath cost,
So dear is still the memory of that dream;
Yet, if I name my guilt, ’tis not to boast,
None can deem harshlier of me than I deem:
I trace this scrawl because I cannot rest—
I’ve nothing to reproach or to request.  

Byron had gotten just such phrases from Caroline’s own letters, and now he also had the ones Lady Calantha writes in Glenarvon: “Remember that you are all on earth to me; and if I lose that for which I have paid so terrible a price, what will be my fate!” Another letter says, “I forsook everything for you.”  

Calantha never tires of naming her guilt: “It is myself alone I blame, on me, on me be the crime.”  

Yet she won’t regret: “Think not that I wish to repine, or that I lament the past.”  

She repeats many times Julia’s sentiment that she has “nothing to reproach”: “Glenarvon, I do not reproach you, I never will”; “Oh fear not, Glenarvon, that I shall intrude or reproach you”; “I will never learn to hate or reproach you.”  

The next stanza of Julia’s letter focuses upon the contrasting possibilities for men and women:

Man’s love is of his life a thing apart,  
‘Tis woman’s whole existence; man may range  
The court, the camp, church, the vessel, and the mart,  
Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange  
Pride, fame, ambition, to fill up his heart,  
And few there are whom these cannot estrange;  
Man has all these resources, we but one,  
To love again, and be again undone.  

These ideas have been traced to other sources, like Madame de Staël’s De l’Influence des Passions (1796) and Corrine (1807).  

They occur also, however, in Glenarvon, where Calantha says, “You know not what a woman feels when remorse, despair, and the sudden loss of him she loves, assail her at once.”  

Glenarvon’s narrator underscores this theme:

That which causes the tragic end of a woman’s life, is often but a moment of amusement and folly in the history of a man. Women, like toys, are sought after, trifled with, and then thrown by with every varying caprice. Another and another still succeed; but to each thus cast away, the pang has been beyond thought, the stain indelible, and the wound mortal.  

The narrator subsequently comments that “Calantha saw Glenarvon triumphant and herself deserted.”  

The conclusion of Julia’s letter offers many parallels with Glenarvon. Julia writes,

My breast has been all weakness, is so yet;  
I struggle, but cannot collect my mind;  
My blood still rushes where my spirit’s set,  
As roll the waves before the settled wind;  
My brain is feminine, nor can forget—  
To all, except your image, madly blind;  
As turns the needle, trembling to the pole  
It ne’er can reach, so turns to you my soul.  

In Glenarvon, Calantha also complains that her lover has seduced her with his power of attraction:

I am nothing, a mere cypher: you might be all that is great and superior. Act
rightly, then, my friend . . . I have followed you into a dark abyss; and now that you, my guide, my protector, have left my side, my former weakness returns, and all, that one smile of your’s could make me forget, oppresses and confounds me.”

Caroline’s imagery of involuntary attraction occurred very early in their relationship, when she wrote to Byron on stationery decorated with seashells: “The Rose Lord Byron gave to Lady Caroline Lamb died in despight of every effort made to save it; probably from regret at its fallen fortunes.” She then sent Byron the flower she wished most to resemble—a sunflower, because it had a “noble and aspiring mind,” and it followed with its gaze “the bright star to whom it pays constant homage.” When Juan comments that Julia’s seal read “Elle vous suit partout [She follows you everywhere],” the phrase comments on Caroline’s uncontrolled pursuit of Byron, a recurring theme of his letters.

Repeating the theme that the man will go on to glory, Julia writes, “And so farewell—forgive me, love me—No, / That word is idle now—but let it go.” These lines echo Calantha’s sentiments: “Generously save me: I ask you not to love me.” In the conclusion of her letter, Julia says: “My misery can scarce be more complete.” Calantha’s words are: “Glenarvon, my misery is at the utmost” and “I am as lonely, as miserable in your absence as you can wish.” These typical recriminations and rationalizations of the jilted might have come from many places, but the evidence argues that Glenarvon gave them their particular form in Byron’s poem.

Naturally, Lady Caroline read Julia’s letter in Don Juan as an allusion to herself. This, taken with the insult of Canto 2’s dismissive “Some play the devil—and then write a novel,” caused her to write her own “New Canto” of Don Juan, published in 1819. At this time, many Byron parodies based on Childe Harold were appearing. Byron’s Cambridge friend, Reverend Frances Hodgson, had published Childe Harold’s Monitor. Satirist William Hone wrote Don Juan: Canto the Third, comprised of 114 stanzas of doggerel. The anonymous Jack the Giant Queller, or Prince Juan, consisted of thirty-eight stanzas of similar quality. Lady Caroline’s poem excels all of these.

Indeed, A New Canto was an act of artistic fulfillment for which the author had served a long apprenticeship, but by this time, Byron had been well-tutored. If he ever knew of its existence, A New Canto provoked no response from him. The poem received one brief notice recommending it “to those who are fond of extravagance, and doggerel versification,” then disappeared, to be forgotten for decades. Thus the literary dialogue ended not in laughter and tears, but rather (in Byron’s own phrase), “in silence and tears.”

His silence; her tears.
Notes


2 Leslie Marchand notes that the items cast into the bonfire were undoubtedly fake. BLJ, 2:260n.


5 Ibid., 1:84. Byron, Complete Poetical Works, 39.

6 Ibid., 2:61. Byron, Complete Poetical Works, 63.

7 Ibid., 2:72-73. Byron, Complete Poetical Works, 66-68.


10 M. G. Lewis, Poems (London, 1812) 24-25.


14 I am indebted to Professor Graham Pont’s generosity in sharing his research on the life of Isaac Nathan. The sheet music of “My Life I Love You,” may be found contained in a bound collection of Nathan’s music in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. The
The setting of “Farewell” occurs in Lady Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon* (London: Henry Colburn, 1816) 2:192. Hereafter “*Glenarvon*.”

15 Letter to John Murray, 1813. John Murray Archive. In Caroline’s novel, this verse becomes:

   By that smile which made me blest
   And left me soon the wretch you see—
   By that heart I once possest,
   Which now, they say, is given to thee—
   By St. Clara’s wrongs and woes—

   Trust not young Glenarvon’s vows. (*Glenarvon* 2:194-95.)


17 *BLJ*, 5:81.

18 *BLJ*, 5:86. To Samuel Rogers, 29 July 1816.

19 Ibid., 5:131.

20 Ibid., 5:187.


22 *BLJ* 5:89.

23 *BLJ*, 5:93.

24 *BLJ* 5:255.

25 See *BLJ* 3:40, qtd. above.

26 *BLJ* 7:37.
Peter Graham precedes me here, in noting Byron’s women would have to become “potent, complex beings.” Don Juan and Regency England (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990) 90, 118.

BLJ, 8:148.

The poem is titled, strangely, “To Caroline,” and dates from 1805, well before he met Lady Caroline—but she had undoubtedly read it. Byron, Complete Poetical Works, 1:135.

Glenarvon, 3:15.

Ibid., 2:359.

Byron’s letter was reproduced as a lithographic facsimile, apparently by Lady Caroline for Medwin, after publication of his Conversations with Lord Byron. Leslie Marchand accepts the letter as undoubtedly Byron’s handwriting, suggesting that it must have been composed on 12 August, just after Byron had convinced Caroline to rejoin her husband. BLJ, 2:185.

Don Juan 5.70, 5.72. All citations from Byron, Complete Poetical Works, vol. 5.

Ibid., 5.118 and 5.141.

Ibid., 1.199.

Ibid., 1.193.

Glenarvon 3:61, 78.

Ibid., 3:60, 61.

Ibid., 3:58, 59, 77.

Don Juan, 1.194.

Hobhouse thought of de Staël’s works. Jerome McGann suggests a possible alternative in Jane Austen’s Persuasion. See Byron, Complete Poetical Works, 5:680n.
42 Glenarvon, 3:79.

43 Ibid., 3:90-91, 119.

44 Don Juan 1.195.

45 Glenarvon, 3:60-61.


47 Don Juan, 1.198.

48 Don Juan 1.196 and Glenarvon, 3:80.

49 Don Juan, 1.197 and Glenarvon, 3:76, 58.

50 Ibid., 2.201.

51 Childe Harold’s Monitor; or, Lines, occasioned by the last canto of Childe Harold, including hints to contemporaries (London: 1818) consisted of sixty-two pages of couplets and thirty-two of notes. Henry Colburn published Harold the Exile in September 1819--at three volumes and 21 shillings it was longer than, and twice as expensive as Don Juan.

52 Hone, Don Juan, Canto the Third. Anon., Jack the Giant Queller, or Prince Juan.