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Paul Douglass

*San Jose State University*, paul.douglass@sjsu.edu

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## Lady Caroline Lamb Before Byron: The Godfrey Vassal Webster Affair

Paul Douglass

*San Jose State University*

The romance between Lady Caroline Lamb and Lord Byron in 1812 has been told in many forms, from novels like her own *Glenarvon* (1816) and Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1833), to Robert Bolt's 1972 feature film, recent genre fiction, and even imaginary lost journals.<sup>1</sup> But before Byron, from 1810 to 1811, Caroline had a long, messy affair with Sir Godfrey Vassal Webster, known only through letters, most unpublished, held in the British library, the public records office in Chichester, the private archives of Lord Bessborough and those at Chatsworth and Castle Howard. Because this affair with Sir Godfrey anticipates the one with Byron, the facts of the first have often been conflated with the second, which it resembles in uncanny ways: a titled and unattached young man with an aura of danger, repeated but broken promises to break off the relationship, public displays and uninhibited expressions of her emotional turmoil sometimes in verse.

When Caroline met Webster in 1810, he was just twenty, intensely interesting to young women, a hero of the Spanish campaign whose reputation was so bad that even the Whips club, notorious for its low standards, had rejected him. Reputedly, he had brought back the skull of a French soldier which he had converted into a macabre-looking gold-encrusted drinking cup. Caroline was twenty-four and the mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old boy, Augustus, who had begun to have *grand mal* epileptic seizures and was showing signs of mental retardation. She had been married to William Lamb for five years, residing in Melbourne House in a family that was atheistical, self-consciously *blasé* about morals, and politically ambitious. Beloved by her husband, Caroline was eager to learn, hot-tempered, jealous, and childishly pious. Though she tried to embrace the urbane style and values of the Lambs, Lady Caroline still did not know how to handle the consequences. While her cousin, the Marquis of Hartington (nicknamed "Hart," and later the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire) joked that she simply had no understanding of the proprieties, it was no laughing matter (Lady Caroline Lamb to the Marquis of Hartington. 21 January 1810. Devonshire MSS. Chatsworth [UK], 5th Duke's Group, f. 1966).<sup>2</sup> William was heir to the Melbourne title and estate and needed an appropriate wife.

Alas, Caroline could not or would not adapt to the complicated social milieu of Regency London. For example, while most women of social standing avoided introductions to Lady Holland, who, as a divorcée was unwelcome at court, Caroline became her friend. Caroline met Sir Godfrey, Lady Holland's eldest son by her previous marriage, at Holland House, where a circle of political liberals regularly gathered. Thereafter Sir Godfrey gave her many gifts and accompanied her in public. Observing them at a party, Lady Melbourne

wrote deriding her daughter-in-law's lack of "shame or compunction," and her complete abandonment to Webster who seemed to direct "every impulse" of Caroline's mind.

Yr behavior last night was so disgraceful in its appearances and so disgusting in its motives that it is quite impossible it should ever be effaced from my mind. When one braves the opinion of the World, sooner or later they will feel the consequences of it and although at first people may have excused your forming friendships with all those who are censured for their conduct, from yr youth and inexperience yet when they see you continue to single them out and to overlook all decencys imposed by Society—they will look upon you as belonging to the same class.

(Lady Melbourne to Lady Caroline Lamb, 13 April 1810. British Library Add. MS 45546 f. 16.)<sup>3</sup>

The affair entered the stream of gossip that always swirled around the Devonshire, Bessborough, and Melbourne families, and it caused her mother, Lady Bessborough, considerable pain. Caroline responded contritely to her mother-in-law, making the first of several promises to break off with Webster:

My Dearest Lady Melbourne I must indeed have a heart of iron if it was not most deeply wounded and affected by your letter and conversation[,]<sup>4</sup> by my Mothers sorrow and by the unparalleled kindness and patience of my friends and will you then make me this offer, shall I again be receivd be loved be confided in by you all. God knows and sees my heart the sacrifice is greater than it should be but I will make it. by this very post I write to Sir Godfrey I tell him the same to you and my resolution is as irrevocable as it is painful yet you may trust me [ . . . ] hardened & selfish as I am I can most truly & too painfully feel for your reproof & the grief & infamy I am bringing on myself & family—I solemnly on my knees call God to witness that (unless ill) I return here on Tuesday & consent neither to write to or see Sir Godfrey any more but *in Public by accident* & as a *common acquaintance* I even go further I will *avoid* him & I will write no more—no indeed indeed I will not [—] it shall end here [ . . . ] God knows I am humiliated enough & did not expect I should ever act in this manner, some heads may bear perfect happiness & perfect liberty mine cannot & those principles which I came to William with—that horror of vice of deceit of any thing that was the least improper that Religion which I believed in then without a doubt & with what William pleasd to call superstitious enthusiasm—merited praise & ought to have been cherished—they were safeguards to a character like mine & nobody can tell the almost childish innocence & inexperience I had preserved till then—all at once this was thrown off & William himself

though still unconscious of what he has done William himself taught me to regard without horror all the forms & restraints I had laid so much stress on—with his excellent heart right head & superiour Mind he might & will go on with safety without them he is superiour to those passions & vanities which mislead weaker characters & which however I may be ashamed to own it are continually misleading me—he called me Prudish said I was straight laced amused himself with instructing me in things I need never have heard or known & the disgust I at first felt to the worlds wickedness I till then had never even heard of in a very short time gave way to a general laxity of principles which little by little unperceived by you all has been undermining the few virtues I ever possessed—Williams love for me is such that he is almost blind to my faults yet that first ardour that romantic passion which we both experienced was far too violent to last—contrary to the general opinion on this subject it has lasted far longer on his side than on mine & with its enthusiasm has ceased also its inconveniences my temper is calm we never quarrel never shake the House with storms of passion as we did for the first three years—I can command myself now & he rejoices in the change yet he looks not for the cause—gratitude affection even love remain in my heart but those feelings which carry with them such a charm and existed so many years unabated had lately been on the decline—forgive me Lady Melbourne for telling you all this I would wish to account for a conduct which appears to me as inconceivable as it is without excuse [ . . . ] yours most gratefully *undutifully* & affectionately  
Caroline Lamb

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Melbourne. April 1810. British Library Add. MS 45546 f.13-15.)

In a subsequent letter to Lady Melbourne, Caroline reported confessing her sin to her husband, William, along with details of Sir Godfrey's gifts of jewelry and a dog named Peppeo that suddenly became symbolic of this dangerous liaison:

My Dearest Lady Melbourne

Sir G[odfrey] gave me a bracelet at Argyle street with his hair & just before I went I desired him to put it on which he did behind one of the doors The next Morning I made a jeweller come & rivitt it so that it could not come off without breaking the chain—this Morning I took fright all my sins came upon me a sudden terror came into my head as I lookd on my little blooming Augustus that I might be punished for my conduct by the loss of what I neglected—your kindness my Mothers my husbands—my own husbands all ocured to me. I tore the bracelet off my arm & put it up with my chains in a Box by itself I have written to desire some one will fetch the dog & on my knees I have written to William to tell him not any falsehoods not as you say any stories to conceal my guilt but the whole disgraceful truth I have told him I have deceived him I have trusted solely to his mercy & generosity—yet as I have not said you [—] any of you [—] know anything about it do not mention it to him unless he does to you but write to me my Dearest Lady Melbourne write & tell me you forgive me for I am indeed very miserable very repentant I inclose you a

letter I beg you will read & get [sent?] to you I made the promise of not writing again therefore you may inclose it to say you send it I am very superstitious and believe all those who are wicked are. this Morning the dog the beautiful little Peppeo playing & running about me snapped at the child but did not bite him—it was this occassiond my fear great God I thought if this dog should go mad & bite Williams child what would become of me I went into the garden & took a long walk the dog suddenly droppd before me in a fit foaming at the mouth—it turnd my heart sick I trembled all over I took it home & prayd that I might be forgiven then it was I tore my bracelet off & wrote to William I wish he could shew you my letter as you would see in it that I have told no stories used no deceits but that I have made one request which I hope he will not refuse that of not naming the person—whom I have not only assured him was no ways to blame but like wise told him that he has warnd me of my danger & was as anxious as possible that the whole should cease here—

They think the dog is Mad. I am sure this cannot be but it is very dreadful to me very very alarming—till Sir Godfrey returns you shall take care of his presents for me & then return them God Bless you my Dearest Ly Melbourne, pray do not name the Person to William or say any thing about it & write to me immediately

yrs most truly from what dangers I have been saved Good God I tremble when I think of it I was indeed on the brink of perdition & about to encounter misery infamy & ruin with perfect levity.

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Melbourne. [April-June] 1810. British Library Add. MS 45546 f.21-22.)

Trying to mend her relationship with Sir Godfrey's mother, Caroline wrote to Lady Holland, saying they were both "liberal minded women who like Mary Wollstonecraft stand up for the rights of the Sex & wear our shackles with dignity—these Lords of Creation who pretend in England to trample us under foot are just as much our slaves & just as little can do without us as any others with less big pretentions—only like other noble animals we let them bridle & Curb us for want of knowing our strength" (Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. July 1810, after the 14<sup>th</sup> British Library Add. MS 51560 f.137).

Confident that she had contained the damage and that William had forgiven her, Caroline renewed her correspondence with her cousin "Hart" with whom, from childhood, she had shared a taste for "black drop," a tincture of opium, and other drugs mixing homeopathic remedies with more addictive stuff common in elite households. Hart, whose health had never been good, had returned from a trip to Ireland with a bad cold. Caroline now wrote him in an antic mood that was a sign of bad things to come:

My most sanative Elixir of Julep—my most precious Cordial Confection—my most dilutable Sal Polychrist & mash mallows paste. Truly comfortable spirit of Hartshorn Tincture of Rhubarb & Purgative Senna Tea—it is impossible my most exquis-

site Medicine chest for me to describe the delightful effect the  
 potion you sent me this Morning had upon me [ . . . ] my tusks  
 ache madly—would I could Louch at you—poor meagre  
 Bone. I wreackd not how like we had all been to lose you in the  
 Land of Erin go Brah. Write if you cherish the virtue Mercy—  
 for I must hear from you one way or tother [ . . . ] & now  
 mean to adjure the delights of the flesh & all the pomps &  
 vanities of this Wicked World  
 Love & cultivate Spencer Ponsonby  
 God preserve you my Dearest  
 Tartar Emetic your own  
 Syrop of Elderob  
 write very soon  
 tell my Brother I shall write very soon to him—  
 (Lady Caroline Lamb to the Marquis of Hartington. 31 July  
 1810. Devonshire MSS. Chatsworth [UK], 5th Duke's Group,  
 f. 1983.)

In the late summer of 1810, Caroline expressed remorse over  
 the affair in letters to her cousin Georgiana:

My Dearest G  
 [ . . . ] I have a bad head ache and am just setting out for  
 Brocket Hall where I left William & did you ask me whether I  
 felt sure of my future conduct—alas I have acted so ill that I  
 have lost much of that vain confidence I used to boast of, but  
 if feeling once more little short of adoration for Wm & per-  
 fect perfect happiness can prevent my making myself odious  
 & wretched then I think I may say I am sure I will act very  
 differently in future—you cannot think how painful it is to me  
 to recur to that subject how once I liked to talk of it is the only  
 thing surprises me, but indeed William's behaviour to me  
 since has been such that I must have been bad indeed not to  
 have been touched by it. God Bless you dearest never allude  
 to this but if ever I behave in the same way again or anything  
 like it cease to care about me I shall not be worthy of any  
 one's regard yours ever & most affectionately,  
 CL  
 (Lady Caroline Lamb to Georgiana, Lady Morpeth, future 6th  
 Countess of Carlisle. 10 August 1810. Castle Howard MSS J18/  
 35/52.)<sup>5</sup>

And yet the affair continued: the lovers exchanged to-  
 kens of affection, and Caroline wrote poems for Sir Godfrey,  
 like this one found in the Bessborough Papers:

Since I no longer little John can send  
 And all unmeant I did that night offend  
 Without too much regarding sex—or age  
 Accept the bearer he shall be your Page  
 Near to your heart oh place the boy I send you  
 Screen him from censoring eye & hold him dear  
 Round all the World faithful he shall attend you  
 Cause you to smile or sooth[e] the falling tear—  
 (West Sussex Records Office, Chichester. Bessborough Pa-  
 pers, C1 D4 Folder 161.)<sup>6</sup>

Above this poem the date “1810” has been changed in pencil  
 to 1812, perhaps by a well-meaning archivist. The poem is  
 dedicated to someone, and though the name has been scrib-  
 bled over in ink, it appears it was addressed to “Sir G.” If so,  
 then Byron was not the first lover to whom Lady Caroline  
 may have appeared in a page's uniform.

Hart, a bachelor, had enjoyed a close relationship with  
 Caroline from childhood and, believing she was meant to  
 marry him, collapsed after hearing she was betrothed to Wil-  
 liam. Consoling and yet teasing him, Caroline sought to per-  
 suade him that her affair with Sir Godfrey should not lower  
 her in Hart's opinion.

My Dearest Hartington  
 I am really quite uneasy about you hearing from all sides odd  
 tales about you—some saying you Cough others that you are  
 feverish and in short all agreeing that you are not quite well—  
 now my heart of hearts  
 I conjure you on my knees I entreat you if you are not quite  
 the thing to come immediately to Town & any how write to  
 me as I cannot live if I do not hear from you & if you hear I  
 am dead I know well enough you will regret me—here I am  
 safe but not over well—however I neither had my neck broke  
 or got into the Newspapers tho' I behaved a little wild—riding  
 over the Downs and about the sands with all the officers at my  
 heels in a way not very decent for one of my Cloth—I am like  
 the song of Rosa in love with every body & am always abused  
 for it while I thought her a Goddess she thought me a fool &  
 in fact she is most in the right—What a world it is dear sweet  
 boy, what a flimsey patched work face it has—all profession  
 little affection no truth. that you love me I feel sure dearly &  
 deeply though you now & then see my faults but indeed it is  
 but bad speculation to gaze on the black of every object. mine  
 are unfortunately all on the surface I am pitted all over but it  
 is but skin deep—many a fair outside covers a blacker heart—  
 dear little man—take care of yourself & when we meet in a  
 better & happier World we will be unco virtuous [ . . . ]”  
 (Lady Caroline Lamb [Brocket Hall] to the Marquis of Hart-  
 ington. 2 October 1810. Devonshire MSS. Chatsworth [UK],  
 5th Duke's Group, f. 1990.)

Still pretending to have dropped Sir Godfrey, Caroline  
 wrote Lady Holland about her long struggle to read Samuel  
 Richardson's novel *Clarissa*: “Miss Clarissa Harlowe is just  
 dead & I really am so much discomposed at it & at Lovelaces  
 grief to whom I do not think she behaved quite handsomely  
 that I can prate no more nonsense & conclude as Lord  
 Abercorn did one of his speeches that if I have tired you it is  
 no more than what I have done myself [ . . . ] I have been 3  
 years & 7 months reading Clarissa and have now half another  
 vol to finish this is having a quick mind a superabundance of  
 activity of which I am at times accused” [Lady Caroline un-  
 derstates the time somewhat. She had actually tried to read  
 Richardson's *Clarissa* almost twelve years before] (Lady Caro-  
 line Lamb to Lady Holland. 18 October 1810. British Li-  
 brary Add. MS 51560 f.147).

By February 5, 1811, when the Regency was officially established, Caroline's affair with Sir Godfrey Vassal Webster had lasted ten months. Emboldened by his attentions, Caroline wrote poems to him and imprudently read his letters in her mother's company. Lady Bessborough again demanded that Caroline end the affair. Although she intended to confess to Lady Holland, her letter in April was confrontational and defensive.

My Dear Lady Holland. I am going to act in a manner that may appear very improper to you—I have no one to advise me therefore if it is so forgive me [ . . . ] I have seen too much of your son[,] I have drawn him into a correspondence with me which was dangerous for both—his whole conduct has been as generous and as superior to most Mens as you could wish [—] my conduct unfortunately was as blameably the contrary [—] my Mother has long suspected that I was not going on well [—] any one might see it for I took no pains to conceal it [—] I liked Sir Godfrey & was rather proud of what I ought to have been ashamed of [—] the day before yesterday my Mother saw me receive one of his letters [—] I told her vainly it was from another person [—] she would not believe it. the consequence of all this is that we have mutually promised to give up all correspondence all appointed meetings [ . . . ]

This should have ended the confession, but Caroline was irresistibly induced to explain her admission of guilt by mentioning "what ought never to be mentioned," namely,

[ . . . ] that I cannot help thinking you have seen less of him & been less kind to him than you other wise would on my account—I have come to you less also—knowing that however unjust the accusation would be God knows the World might say you encouraged us & let us meet at your House—which has never once been—I therefore hope you will see more of him in future have him with you gain his confidence & save him if you can from a set of wretches who live upon him ruin him & lead him into all sorts of wrong—he has a good understanding an excellent heart & warm good feelings [—] turn them to account & remember I will never come near you again sooner than prevent your seeing as much of him as you ought. I was the only friend in the World who gave him good advice & now I am gone. you who are a much fitter one must take my place. you will of course never mention my name to him [ . . . ] but do not from policy abuse me before him or try and make him think ill of me [—] do not by talking of my love for William & his kindness for me try to make him think I was hypocritical and acted from Caprice & vanity towards him—after what has passd between us these attempts would fail & time & silence only can bring all right again—yet no time will ever bring me back the perfect innocence & enjoyment I once possessd nor shall I ever hear Williams name or meet his eyes without feelings of bitter reproach [—] yes Lady Holland I will own it to you at the risk of degrading myself for ever in your eyes no affection no gratitude for that dear kind husband saved me—no principles of Religion & Virtue [—] it was your son only & to his generosity to his forbearance to his

real friendship for me I owe my preservation from despair & infamy—I shall leave Town for a few days tomorrow & I once more think I trust myself in safe hands by the unbounded confidence I have shewn you & L<sup>d</sup> Holland—as to William he is & I pray God he will ever remain ignorant of what would break his heart<sup>7</sup> [ . . . ] I shall hope you will one or both of you answer my letter to say you forgive me & will think well of me in future yrs most sincerely

C Lamb [ . . . ]

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. before 16 [or 11?] April 1811. British Library Add. MS 51560 f.159.)

Lady Holland replied chastising Caroline as much for effrontery as adultery, which elicited the following response in May 1811:

Dearest Lady Holland—I will answer for it if you look the World over you will not find a Being in it loves you with as true & constant an affection as I do & if you *chuse to consider me lowerd on account of my being the friend of \* your son whom every body seems to scout [ i.e., to deride him] because he chuses to have an opinion of his own & not to be led as most others are by the oracles of Fashion I am sorry—because you will find á la longue that I am not one so easily to be put down[,] that I know what I am about have a fine spirit & am not to be intimidated by Words —I see many shake their heads when they look at me exclaiming ah she knows nothing of the World & the truth is that I know too much of it & will not condescend to obtain its praises by the little arts some practise [ . . . ] I will not give up my acquaintance with Sir Godfrey but I promise you it shall not go on in any way to give offence I am not foolish enough to talk of innocent Friendships & German Trio's [i.e., a *ménage à trois*]—I am not wicked enough to live with one Man & like another [—] I am not lost enough to break every bodies heart & my own by abandoning my husband & child—therefore be easy & assure yourself all will end here if my friends will not talk & if they do bless them I forgive them as who would not in their place—I have one word more to say [—] I cannot help thinking Sir Godfrey could explain the whole [*illegible*] transaction about money but I daresay he will not—hate me or no I am yrs most sincerely & Ld Hollands most affectionately*

Car Lamb

\*a monstrous silly Passage—the common cant of every Woman in similar circumstances!

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. May 1811. British Library Add. MS 51560 f.164.)

On the eve of her sixth wedding anniversary, Caroline wrote in confident tones to Lady Holland as if all was mended. She had discovered the power of Waltzing:

The She Sheridan<sup>8</sup> to her Madonna—can I live without you. Le soleil qui brille pour tout autre est a jamais obscur pour moi<sup>9</sup>—dear & beautiful Lady—are you not a little grieved at my absence—that is what comes of mes alliances—I am like a flame of Fire or a lamp of oil & those I attach myself to Ice [

. . . ] I am like a vestal who thought of other concerns than the pure Flame she hoped Heaven would keep burning—do not condemn me to being burned alive—wait a little & I shall return to dust without any unusual assistance—it is where we are all journeying nor titles nor honours nor Physic nor walzing can keep us aloof one hour beyond our time— [ . . . ] tell Ld Holland the Duke of Gloucester with whom we dined yesterday praised him warmly [—] that good but dull Prince is overjoyed at being Chancellor<sup>10</sup> the word is ever on his lips—sparkles in his eyes & spreads animation over his white cheeks—I saw him speaking low & tenderly to Lady Donegal[.] I listened and the word university quieted my suspicions—after dinner what occurred? ruin to the character of the young & innocent—Walzing was the subject of discussion—Princess Sophy agreed with me that we had better stick to the dance of our own Country—but the Duke insisted on one turn—the Band playd O mein Liebe Augustein & off we went—an extra step of his Highness put me out. vainly I remonstrated round & round we turnd & I never thought walzing so criminal in my life tho' I have always been of opinion & still am that those who like it like it because it is doubtful—those unco good young Women who shudder at the thought of vice like to venture to the edge of the precipice down which so many of their frail companions have been thrown—they simper over an improper Book—ride & flert as Lady Ossulstone<sup>11</sup> calls it in Rotten Row [London's oldest bridle path, through Hyde Park] turn round & round half afraid they are doing wrong & then go home to their Lords pleased like the Pharisee of old that they are not like this sinner whom passion & feeling alone impelld reluctantly to ruin & infamy [—] Lady Ossulstone gave me some advice the other day—pretty Innocents—I like to hear them prate to me it is like a person who has been studying Machiavel taking up Mrs Trimmers lessons<sup>12</sup> in one syllable for making naughty children good—

I too am much inclined to Flert  
but then tis with a Gentleman—  
I ride—but you ride in the dert  
With all the black legs that you can—  
now I do keep in Rotten Row—  
Though that displeases little O [Lady Ossulston]—

I likewise walze & think no wrong  
Lor[d] O sees harm but I see none  
for if you do not walze too long  
& turn the same with every one—  
How can there be the least of evil  
if the Man turnd out the devil  
then I will walze let who say no—  
For who cares much for little O—

& let her Walze & Flert with all the Courtly finikee witless things that call themselves Gentlemanlike in the wide world—lle be off for Arabia where I think I shall find Men & manners more to my own liking—one can bear to be smashed by a Mountain & killed by a Basilisk but nobody can stand being bit at by a fly [—] what are these things in Neckcloathes who dare call their foolish brainless Clods by the term Gen-

tleman—pretty Gentlemen they who have lookd in their glasses and fritterd away their hours from 5 till 4 & twenty in the Company of those who are as insignificant as themselves—an imaginary World whom they have created & whose bye laws they Revere has shackled their feelings till Fashion has fashionably the qu'en diráton seems solely to keep them from a state of stupefaction a shoal of minnows of coach which it is too much honour to look upon & poor moralizer what art thou a solitary Fly

God Bless you  
ever & most truly  
yrs—

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. 29 May 1811. British Library Add. MS 51560 f.177.)

Caroline's wedding anniversary on June 3, 1811, was a debacle. On the day after, Caroline described to Lady Holland the events that were the consequence of her adulterous activities:

William Lamb for the first time last night witnessed what he never before believed. it was our Wedding day & as he left me Walzing at 2 o'clock he reminded me of it & of the vows & protestations I had then made—& are they all changed in a few years [*illegible*]—no believe me—I remaind however till 1/2 past 5 & as I drove home my heart reproached me & tho tired to death I could not sleep—if my Friends feel pain let them ask themselves whether de gáite de coeur<sup>13</sup> I give them a momentary anxiety which must fall short of what I inflict on myself—I regret the infatuation that seems have overcome all my principles & right feelings but if a life of very constant attention & thorough amendment can make up for the past believe me it shall immediately take place my husband is angry with me I do not wonder [ . . . ]

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. 4 June 1811. British Library Add. MS 51560 f.184-186.)

In this same letter she complained to Lady Holland that she had been unfairly charged with transgressing simply to gain attention—the same indictment that would be leveled against Caroline in her subsequent affair with Byron:

My Dear Lady Holland as you had affection enough for me to seem vexd when I was angry with you I think it my duty in point of gratitude not to let any resentment lurk at the bottom of my heart without mentioning it to you—I am frank—you are prudent—& we behave to each other accordingly [—] now in our last reconciliation you vexd me more than during our quarrel—you said hard things to me under the appearance of kindness & by that means prevented my noticing them—once for all therefore I would explain them & then have done with them forever [—] I can quite quarrel but I cannot be your friend by halves—it rests with you to chuse which—but if you like me & wish me to be as I was once—you must believe what I say—for if indeed I have forfeited all right to be believed in what I affirm I am not worthy to be spoken to—the two things you accused me of are false—I have a right therefore to deny them—you affirm that you quite clear me

from all you once feard—that I took you in it is true as I did all my friends & half London [—] that I did it to excite interest & succeeded—that I had acted my part well—shewed my cleverness & now might like a good little Woman amuse myself with something else—these were your very words they have been all this time like weights in my stomach—& finding that I cannot forget them I beg leave at once to explain them to you & you may do as you will about the rest—I have had no wish to excite any emotion in any one—I have just followed the impulse of the moment as I generally do—made myself a great fool—& vexed those who cared about me—

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. 4 June 1811. British Library Add. MS 51560 f.184-186.)

Caroline turned then to her self-justification, arguing to Lady Holland that she was driven by impulses she could not control,

[ . . . ] that I got myself into more difficulty than I thought for by impudence & that I do not find it so easy to get out of it all as you are pleas'd to think but I am of opinion that these transactions degrade & never excite either interest or admiration—they may & do raise the Man in the opinion of some but they lower the Woman to the very dust of the earth & my Pride is somewhat hurt at being named with a set of creatures who have neither passion nor ability—I mean your common door danglers & supper flirts—I did not therefore act ill to excite emotion I acted ill as I act always because I cannot help it [—] because like the good Man in Midas “remember when the Judgment's weak the prejudice is strong”<sup>14</sup> & my passions have so long been used to master my Reason that although it exists it is not every body who knows it does—promises are but so many additions to sin I therefore make none but if you chuse to believe me you may—I will profit by the lesson I have had & my future life shall be dedicated to Wm & my family & my future efforts to conquering every feeling that ought not to exist in a well regulated mind [ . . . ] [I] know too well that when a Woman places herself in the power of any Man whether young or old—unless they really love her (which is a rare exception) they treat her as they think she deserves & the most Gentlemanlike are not ashamed when they think it will not hurt themselves to treat her with familiarity & disrespect—Godfrey has behaved very differently to me—I know he would rather see me happy than have his Vanity gratified at my expence—if I see him no more which must now be the case I hope those will fill my place who will advise him as well & be as sincerely his friend as I shall ever be Adieu & believe me yrs affectionately if you wish it

Caroline Lamb  
(ibid.)

Despite her false position, Caroline was furious when Lady Holland said she was no longer welcome at Holland House parties:

[I]n the 1st place I beg leave to remark that I told you positively last night that I could not come and therefore your ex-

trema anxiety to prevent me might have been wholly set aside—but Further I desire you will once for all hear my determined resolution—I will never set foot in any ones House who instead of being happy to receive me thinks it proper to make conditions—you may easily make your choice & I call the God of Heaven to witness I will to my death abide by it—but remember Lady Holland I do not wish to be disrespectful in my manner of speaking to you—however I may think you have behaved to me as my Mothers Friend I shall never offer you any childish or public incivility—but neither by writing or by conversation or by any other means will I from this hour hold the smallest communication with you—I am just—& whatever my faults when I see a person actuated tho' against me by a spirit of rectitude of Religion of strict undeviating principles I bow to an authority which however rigid I must admire—but when I perceive mere Worldly prudence conquer every feeling of affection kindness & humanity—I have done & I would as soon Waste my affections on a stone as on such a character—to tell you that whatever has been said whatever might have been said of you I would have stood firm to you tho' the whole World had deserted you is what you know & knowing it I would have you learn that no human power shall ever dissolve the Friendship or allow the sentiments I feel for him some call your son but you do well to renounce a Mothers name—& to leave him to the false friends & bad Company your neglect of him has early brought him to—for were you to call him son & speak of him still as I have sometimes heard you it might be deem'd no greater impertinence in me to remind you of the Duties of a Mother than in you to taunt me with those of a Wife—

(Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. [July 1811.] British Library Add. MS 51560 f.187.)

After accusing her of being a bad mother, Caroline suggested (as she would later do with Byron) an imminent elopement:

I will sooner give up wealth comfort peace of mind & every other good & follow that Man than I will bear to hear him continually made an object of scorn & abuse & denied the common privilege of meeting & speaking to me when I please—  
(ibid.)

Caroline's furnace was roaring by now:

as to the gnats & mites that dare to peck at me let them look to themselves—I will turn upon them before long with the vengeance which one bated & pursued at length is taught to feel & level them to the dust from which they sprung—what are these things that dare to speak of me—at best only my equals & by what I can find many of them inferior to me in the satiric powers they would stab me with—grant me but health & life & if I chuse it you shall see them flatter & follow me & lick the dust I tread on—Lady Holland if this is the case I shall be courted by you [—] that which is loved becomes lovely in your eyes—& as this is the case an ambitious mind may still hope to obtain or keep your affection but to speak

the candid truth I am too great an admirer of the warm & sincere heart to lay much stress on such professions [—] keep them therefore for the new favorites of Fashion who shall sail smoothly & propitiously down her silver Tide—keep them for those who dare not think for themselves & acknowledge other jurisdiction besides that which God & their own conscience imposes—that I did love you once I showed you & to this I attribute the change in your manner to me whatever the cause from this hour we part—wishing you all happiness to yourself & your whole family—I remain more sincerely than you deserve—

yours

Caroline Lamb

(ibid.)

Anticipating that her letter would be shared and she would become herself a victim of mockery, Caroline continued in a postscript:

to you who deal in short but cutting sentences this Heroic Epistle may appear ridiculous [—] laugh at it as you chuse I know the anger of a Human Being is most contemptible do not therefore think I wish to intimidate you I merely speak a language no wonder you cannot understand [—] the language of a warm & wounded heart wounded by you in a manner no after-talking can repair—nor is it merely now this present note tho' that set all on fire but the sparks were kindled long before & unlike general conflagrations behind me it will be long before they burn themselves out—there is one thing I wish those who pretend to care for me would know [—] if I am playing a desperate game let them remember I am as firm as I am fearless & nothing but tenderness & gentleness shall move me—at such a moment I could have hoped to have been other wise employd—but it is no matter [—] my feelings are no doubt of very little consideration to you—  
(ibid.)

No sooner had she sent this letter than Caroline regretted it. She apologized immediately—the harbinger of so many apologies she would make during her affair with Byron: “My Dearest Lady Holland, I entreat you to forgive the very very improper letter I wrote last night [ . . . ] I go tomorrow to Brocket & if either of us should die I shall on my death bed be miserable for the letter I wrote last night—to say my spirits were horrid that I was unhappy angry is no excuse—were you to forgive me happen what would I would Gallop over to see you at eleven tomorrow morning” (Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. [July 1811.] British Library Add. MS 51560 f.190). Caroline’s ability to exhaust the patience of her friends and relations is nowhere better exemplified than in her apologies. However sincerely she might say, “I am miserable quite miserable at what I have done [ . . . ] indeed indeed I am unhappy humbled mortified & only wish I could throw myself at your feet,” she would always follow with more self-justification (Lady Caroline Lamb to Lady Holland. 6 August 1811. British Library Add. MS 51560 f.194).

This time, however, the Webster affair had truly ended. In October, 1811, Caroline wrote to her cousin Georgiana of William’s hunting exploits with “Fox & pheasants,” and described long horseback rides and visits with neighbors. Though Augustus’s epilepsy had not subsided as the doctors had promised, she renewed her commitment to her young son, calling him “my bosom friend” and “Wm Lambs delight.” Like a hastily-drawn picture of connubial bliss, their family was “united like 3 flames or 3 oaks or what you will” (Lady Caroline Lamb to Georgiana, Lady Morpeth, future 6th Countess of Carlisle. 25 October 1811. Castle Howard MSS J18/35/53). The Webster affair had smoldered out, and Caroline was anxious to rekindle the fire of her married life.

Not seven months later Caroline would read an advance copy of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and ignite another more notorious conflagration. This one would be immensely more damaging to her and to her family and friends. It would contain most of the elements, however, of the affair she had so recently ended: a dangerous, bad and “mad” man; a public display of shocking behavior; defiance followed by contrition, followed by renewed defiance; a loyal defense of her co-conspirator; and a childlike belief that all would be set right so long as William continued to love her. Because the Godfrey Webster affair appears so much like the Byron affair that followed, that virtually unknown *prior* dark amour of Lady Caroline Lamb, has merged with the titanic literary figure who supplanted him in her affections.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John D. Hasler has published an on-demand book (an individual copy is made when you order) with Xlibris Corporation titled *Memoirs—Lady Caroline Lamb* (2005). Though it completely fails to capture Caroline’s characteristic tone, diction, misspellings, and worldview, it is nonetheless based on a good deal of careful research. The film *Lady Caroline Lamb*, directed by Robert Bolt, was released in 1972 with Sarah Miles (Lady Caroline), John Finch (William Lamb), Richard Chamberlain (Byron), and co-starring Margaret Leighton, Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, John Mills (Pulsar Productions, 1972). An example of recent genre fiction is Jill Jones’s romance novel, *My Lady Caroline* (New York: St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>I must here gratefully acknowledge the permission of the Duke of Devonshire to publish the letters included in this essay. Andrew Peppitt and Diane Naylor of the Devonshire archives at Chatsworth gave skilful and gracious assistance at every stage in the research of my life of Lady Caroline (*Lady Caroline Lamb: A Biography* (Palgrave 2004)) and my edition of her selected letters: *The Whole Disgraceful Truth: Selected Letters of Lady Caroline Lamb* (forthcoming from Palgrave in 2006).

<sup>3</sup>The letters from the British Library are in the public domain. This particular letter is printed in Jonathan Gross’s edition of Lady

Melbourne's correspondence, *Byron's "Corbeau Blanc"* (Houston: Rice UP, 1997) 107.

<sup>4</sup>The minimum punctuation has been added to Lady Caroline's prose. All editorial emendations, including ellipses, are in brackets.

<sup>5</sup>The letters here published from the archives at Castle Howard are by the kind permission of the Director Dr. Christopher Ridgway and his able assistant Alison Brisby.

<sup>6</sup>The texts here published from the Bessborough Papers are by permission of the Lord Bessborough and with the kind assistance of Alison McCann of the West Sussex Record Office.

<sup>7</sup>Presumably William would have been heartbroken to discover that his wife's earlier confession and repentance had not prevented her committing the same offense with the same man.

<sup>8</sup>An odd phrase, comparing herself to Sheridan, whom some have suspected was Caroline's father.

<sup>9</sup>Literally: "The sun that shines for all others is forever obscure for me." Thanks to Professor Danielle Trudeau of San Jose State University for supplying this translation.

<sup>10</sup>i.e., the Prince of Wales is delighted to have been declared Regent ("Chancellor").

<sup>11</sup>Corisande de Grammont, a French émigrée who grew up in the Devonshire-Bessborough household with Lady Caroline and then married Lord Ossulston.

<sup>12</sup>Sarah Trimmer (mother of Selina Trimmer, the governess of the Devonshire-Bessborough households) was a well-known author of didactic books for children.

<sup>13</sup>i.e., wantonly. Interestingly, Lady Caroline's friend, the Reverend Sidney Smith composed a Waltz titled "Gâité de coeur" in this period.

<sup>14</sup>A phrase from Kane O'Hara's burletta, *Midas* (1764), Act 1. Sc. 4.

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## Toys of Wrath: *The Prelude* 10: 363-74 and *Aeneid* 7: 374-84

Arnd Bohm  
*Carleton University*

In writing an epic, Wordsworth was aware of the intricate rules. The subject was important enough for him to express his perplexed quest for a suitable topic in *The Prelude* (all references to 1850: 1.158-269). Another daunting challenge was the requirement for multi-layered allusions to his epic precursors. More than simple citations, the allusion had to be adapted to the present, to synthesize the old and the new, which, in the sixteenth century was called "to overgo," and which Hegelians called "*Aufhebung*" ("sublation" or "supercession"). Hence Wordsworth's allusions in *The Prelude* are loyal to their origins and subversive of them at the same time, as Edwin Stein showed in *Wordsworth's Art of Allusion* (1988).

Until Bruce Graver's monumental edition of Wordsworth's translations from the *Aeneid* (begun as a doctoral dissertation in 1983), Wordsworth's close relationship to Virgil had rarely been recognized.<sup>1</sup> Graver points out that the lines "We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand" (2.137; 10.604) borrow from the *Aeneid*: "*quadripedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum*" (8.596; 11.875) and imitate Virgil's repetition of the line. In 1991, John Hodgson examined the complexities of the alluding phrase "Was it for this?", ultimately derived from *Aeneid* 2.664-67 and 4.675-81. In *Romantic Aversions: Afermaths of Classicism in Wordsworth and Coleridge*

(1999), J. Douglas Kneale heard Wordsworth echoing the Polydorus episode from Book 3 of the *Aeneid*, reaching into *The Prelude* (6. 430-4) (150).

Another passage in which Wordsworth reworks the *Aeneid* is the moving description in Book 10 of how the momentum of the French Revolution seized participants:

They found their joy  
They made it proudly, eager as a child,  
(If light desires of innocent little ones  
May with such heinous appetites be compared),  
Pleased in some open field to exercise  
A toy that mimics with revolving wings  
The motion of a wind-mill; though the air  
Do of itself blow fresh, and make the vanes  
Spin in his eyesight, *that* contents him not,  
But, with the plaything at arm's length, he sets  
His front against the blast, and runs amain,  
That it may whirl the faster. (363-74)

Richard Gravil sees the comparison between the Terror and children at play as "the oddest of his exculpatory tropes: the guillotine whirls like a windmill, with a kind of macabre innocence" (134). The incongruity intensifies Wordsworth's stark

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