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## FROM PRAISE TO DISPARAGEMENT: BYRON'S CRITICAL RECEPTION

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**Abstract:** Lord Byron has been in his time, and still is one of the most notorious writers in English literature. Therefore, criticism on his oeuvre has fluctuated from praise to disparagement beginning with his contemporaries and continuing up to the present day critical thought. This paper devoted on Byron's canon will focus on several aims. Firstly, it intends to present the most significant critical approaches of Byron's works from the time Byron lived and created. Secondly, it aims to focus on those critics who have specifically examined Byron's *The Giaour* and have contributed to the knowledge of this Oriental tale. Further on, it will examine literary criticism that has made a significant advancement or a change in the treatment of Byron's Oriental heroes, especially in *The Giaour* and the other Oriental tales, focusing on the inclusion of supernatural or vampiric elements. Finally, it seeks to present different critical trends in a chronological manner so as to note the general development of approaches towards Byron's canon, commencing from the critical response to Byron's work by his contemporaries, then unfolding the attitudes of the Victorian critic, followed by the most distinguished critics of the twentieth century. The paper involves diverse perspectives and trends of the previous century, such as Marxism, feminism, gender studies and other, and evaluates their contribution to the critical estimation of Byron's poetry. It particularly focuses on the impact of Byron's poetry and persona on the creation and development of the Byronic Hero, while pointing to the evident Gothic strand which combined with his charismatic character fashioned a line of literary vampires.

**Keywords:** morally appropriate, personal life, powerful emotions, Byronic Heroes

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Caroline Franklin (*Byron*, 2006) suggests three basic trends in contemporary literary criticism. The first one falls into the period from 1812 to 1816, which has concentrated on whether his poetry was morally appropriate, and the fact that their judgement was obscured by aspects like Byron's popularity, his noble status and the promotional skills of his reputable publisher, John Murray. The next phase of literary criticism is between 1816 and 1822, when the scandal in his personal life and his radical political ideas created a critical uproar. This was the period of the creation of works like *Don Juan* and *Cain*, which imposed the issue of the liberty of the press and could have got the author to be prosecuted had he not been a nobleman. The period after 1822 was marked by the change of his publisher with the Hunt brothers, whose radical positions brought Byron harsh criticism in some of the most prestigious literary journals. Byron's fight in Greece and his early death bestowed his image with the heroic characteristic of a liberty fighter. This brought popularity to his poetry among new audiences such as the lower classes, despite the persistent mixed critical opinion.

### 2. CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

At the time Byron wrote his first book *Hours of Idleness* (1807), there were two opposing literary periodicals, the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review* established in 1809. Byron's first book of poetry *Hours of Idleness* received good reviews in general, but it was harshly attacked by the *Edinburgh Review* accused of being egoistic projections of an aristocratic amateur: "Besides a poem above cited on the family seat of the Byron's, we have another of eleven pages on the self-same subject ... It concludes with five stanzas on himself" (Rutherford, 2013, p. 31). Hence, followed Byron's renowned scornful satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* published in 1809 in the *Quarterly Review*. However, the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* made him enormously famous and the large number of sold copies of the Oriental tales that followed witnesses the immense popularity he received (Franklin, 2006).

Andrew Rutherford's *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (2013) clearly illustrates the fact that the contemporary reaction to Byron's versed tales was directed towards the powerful emotions he expressed, as well as the emotional reaction that they provoked in the readers and critics. Among others, Sir Francis Jeffrey (1812) wrote favorably of the quality of the verse, the fragmentary structure and the main character of *The Giaour*, just as Sir Walter Scott (1813) and Leigh Hunt, who esteemed his works for the energy and fervor. However, a large number of contemporaries seem to have condemned his works with George Ellis (1812) stating that Byron has left the boundaries of poetry and entered the area of 'metaphysics'; then, Henry Crabb Robinson who wrote in his *Diary* (1813) on *The Giaour* that despite "a few energetic lines" it was "as worthless as" (Rutherford, 2013, p. 68) he had expected. In addition, Jane Austen (1818) criticized not only the emotions but the way these were demonstrated in the *Oriental Tales* as inappropriate

for the young minds. These initial reviews and criticism showcase the extreme polarity of opinion on Byron's works, particularly the tales, by his contemporaries.

The publication of *Don Juan* was followed by a wave of negative criticism. Blackwood's Edinburgh magazine stated that the poet was of a "depraved heart" and stressed his bad character and relationship with his wife (Redpath, 1973, p. 44). The radical Leigh Hunt, on the other hand, supported *Don Juan* by negating its immorality and claiming that its satire was a realistic representation of the "folly and wickedness" of society (Rutherford, 2013, p. 177). However, Robert Southey in 1821 in the preface of his poem *The Vision of Judgement*, harshly attacked the morality of *Don Juan* stating:

The publication of a lascivious book is one of the worst offences which can be committed against the well-being of society. It is a sin, to the consequences of which no limits can be assigned, and those consequences no after repentance in the writer can counteract. (Rutherford, 2013, p. 180)

With *Cain* Byron was accused for unorthodox theology among others by his friend John Cam Hobhouse, who acclaimed it as "a complete failure" and expressed his fears about its boldness. (Rutherford, 2013, p. 214) However, writers such as Goethe, Sir Walter Scott and Percy Shelly expressed themselves very favorably, praising its sublimity and poetical power (Rutherford, 2013).

After 1822, Byron's reputation fell drastically as a result of the change of publisher, and his radicalism and notoriousness was followed by the ferocity of the right-wing press (Marshall, 1960). In 1831, Macaulay offered a different perspective of Byron's verse. He perceived in Byron a poet whose verse was shaped by the previous Augustinian writers and the Romantic writers that followed (Rutherford, 2013). This was a refreshing change of focus after the previous predominant accusations of immorality in his verse.

### 3. THE VICTORIAN CRITIC

While his works did not receive much positive critical acclaim in Britain, the European audiences and critics were delighted by his poetry. These critics valued his verse for promoting liberty, which sounded great in the minds of patriots with aspirations for freedom from their regimes. Giuseppe Mazzini, an Italian writer, in 1839 produced his essay "Byron and Goethe", in which he asserted that these were the two writers were the main representatives of their age of "revolutionary individualism", around which all "lesser minds" combine. (Rutherford, 2013, p. 330)

John Morley in 1870 further expanded the previous approach to Byron by stating that literary study ought to avoid using biographical events in the evaluation of the author. He saw in Byron's melancholy brooding characteristic a result of the time of oppression after the French revolution. He considered Byron as a modern poet who had managed to subdue his aesthetic to social issues, and his verse was mainly political. Around the middle of the century, the Victorians tended to focus their criticism on the less famous Romantics at that time, among others William Blake, John Keats, Percy Shelly and particularly William Wordsworth, who became posthumously very famous for *The Prelude*. Byron was often compared with Wordsworth in a less esteemed way (Chew, 1924).

### 4. TWENTIETH CENTURY CRITICISM

The contribution of Eino Railo to the development of critical study on Byron in the beginning of the twentieth century can certainly not be evaded. In his *Haunted Castle* (1927), he shows interest in the Romantic Hero and his origins, mainly seeing him as evolved from the heroes of the Gothic novel. In particular, he points to Scot's *Marmion* and Ann Redcliff's villains as direct antecedents to the Byronic heroes. Railo's focal point remains the necessity to trace the development of the hero and offer a characterization, but at the same time he pointed to the Gothic side of Byron's heroes which would probably pace the future explorations into the vampiric elements that he introduces.

One of the leading studies into Romanticism in the first half of the last century is Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1933). In his chapter *The Metamorphoses of Satan*, he accuses Byron of "slavish imitation" (p. 396) of Mrs. Redcliff's characters, but also claims that Byron is to be credited for having brought to "perfection the rebel type", who is "a remote descendant to Milton's Satan" (p. 61). Another major point Praz makes is that Byron's heroes are related to the perverse sensibility of the Marquis de Sade, that his hero is a fatal and pitiless lover who destroys his victims. He attributes to Byron the creation of the fashion for vampirism which continued in a long sequence of nineteenth century literary vampires. Besides giving only vague explanation of the latter idea, one of the main shortcomings of Praz's argumentation stems in pointing to events in Byron's life and personal characteristics in the attempt to define Byron's heroes in *The Giaour*, *The Corsair* and *Lara*. The analysis of the main characters in these tales and their likeness with vampires is for the most part based on physical traits, and, in fact, despite the resemblance these heroes have, they have been imbued with human aspects: they feel intense passions, remorse and suffer. Praz's undertaking is important to be mentioned because of the overall effect it produced on the critical

thought and the fact that future literary criticism followed that direction, for instance Cedric Hentschell (1940) further develops the satanic and sadistic nature of Byron's heroes in addition to being dandies.

The following period of Byron's study abandoned the idea of erotic-sadistic sensibility in Byron's heroes. The sixties of the twentieth century were marked with great interest into Byron. Thorslev (1962), disregards Praz's "fatal and cruel lover" (1933, p. 77) and argues that Byron's hero is considerate towards women, chivalric, enjoys music and poetry and is often guilt-ridden and remorseful. William Marshall (*The Structure of Byron's Major Poems*, 1965) performs a valuable structural analysis on some of the Turkish Tales, such as *The Corsair*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *Lara* and *The Siege of Corinth*, which he states are "structured primarily through the interaction of the elemental themes of love and death" (p. 40). The main characters of these tales represent allegorical images of either Love, Death, or the fusion of both. Marshall does not include an analysis of *The Giaour*. The following is the only paragraph where *The Giaour* is mentioned:

In *The Giaour*, that unduly long work of many fragments rather than one, Byron first achieves dramatic irony: the simple Moslem fisherman who narrates the major incident of the early phase of the episode, the Giaour's killing of the Moslem Prince Hassan, reveals far more than he himself realizes of the intense hatred of the Christian stranger. But through seven editions Byron indulged in so much mechanical accretion without any organic revision that the dramatic tension established by the fisherman's speeches in the manuscript version of *The Giaour* is totally dissipated.

(1965, p. 22)

Paul Elledge suggests an "intensive and impartial reading of representative Romantic poems to prove that Byron possessed the artistic proficiency and integrity of which we have so long sought to deprive him" (*Byron and the Dynamics of Metaphor*, 1968, p. 45). His argument is based on the "vacillation between poles of orthodox dualism and romantic monism" (p. 46-7). Elledge sees this "dialectical movement" reflected in Byron's poetry and life, in the inability to maintain emotional constancy.

Robert F. Gleckner (*Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, 1967), on the other hand, has extended his study to Byron's corpus as a whole, and contradicts the autobiographical nature of the Oriental Tales suggesting a close thematic approach. He elaborates on themes of mortality, life and death, love, harmony and chaos. On the whole, Gleckner has endeavored to identify coherence in the entire Byron's canon, concentrating on a general and predominant sense of "despair" and "pessimism" as a basic aspect. On numerous occasions in the book, the author reaffirms the existence of "a frightening dark and coherent vision of man and life" (xv). The search for Byron's hopeless vision in every work is so pervasive that it tends to lead to distortions and can certainly not be spotted in all of Byron's works, particularly the satirical poems. Nevertheless, his study generates one of the most excellent discussions on the Oriental Tales.

Jerome J. McGann (1968) managed to avoid the two existing critical trends: the biographical approach of Byron's works and the opposite trend of observing his works as solely the result of the artist's isolated consciousness. McGann assumes a middle way. Four verse tales are studied among which is *The Giaour* in correlation with dualistic allegories. McGann offers one of the most insightful readings of the structure of *The Giaour*. He observes:

*The Giaour* really has only one narrator, the ballad singer, who assumes different moments in his performance but is himself the source of the work's final consistency precisely because he let us know that he is assuming roles, that the poem is a virtuoso production. (*Fiery Dust*, p. 144)

As for the underlying theme, he argues that *The Giaour* is centered around the theme of vengeance (p. 199), and the tale is based on the reflexing images of the Giaour and Hassan, notwithstanding the fact that the narration continues towards pointing to their dissimilarities. McGann perceived the realm of *The Giaour* as "deeply religious: human life cuts athwart two opposed spiritual planes of reality and thus constantly plays out the war in heaven fought between deathless angels and devils" (p. 157). Byron's view of the world was dark and he perceived history as "a blind series of cycles, totally without morality as such" (p. 249).

Two lines of studies occurred during the eighties and nineties. One of them focuses on Byron's political attitudes and their representation in his works. Daniel Watkins's *Social Relations in Byron's Eastern Tales* (1987) concentrates on Byron's concern with certain political issues and the way they are represented in the Oriental Tales. He assumes a materialistic point of view and states that they present "a reflection of human experience as it is lived within specific social frameworks" (p. 138). He found the origin of the overt pessimism in the poet's yearning to produce a political change. He saw in *The Giaour* explicit criticism of rigid religion which resulted in the protagonist's self-isolation from society. Although, revealing political inferences of these texts could be taken as a positive trend compared to some older critics, for instance Andrew Rutherford, who disregarded the Oriental Tales for being merely the poet's youthful projections. He asserts that in Byron's portrayal of the heroes of these tales "there is a strong element of silly self-dramatization" (p. 45). Unfortunately, the literary value of the verse tales was neglected by Watkins on the expense of focusing on ideology and approaching from a Marxist point of view.

The other parallel line of study mainly focuses on gender issues. This approach is evident in the studies of Caroline Franklin, Susan Wolfson and James McKusick among others. Franklin's *Byron's Heroines* (1992) is a study devoted to Byron's female figures in Byron's verse tales. They display a variety of cultural representations, which she found completely dissimilar with the heroines in the narratives of his contemporaries Scott, Southey and others. She finds their role significant to both, the portrayal of hero and the narrative. She suggests:

The *Giaour* best illustrates the reification of the heroine, though all the early tales focus her though the male point of view. Like Astarte in *Manfred* and Francesca in *The Siege of Corinth*, Leila is viewed entirely from the vantage point of her death. (*Byron's Heroines*, 1992, p. 39)

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is evident that Byron's literary work has gone through different treatment and perspectives through the centuries. Contemporary criticism generally failed to separate Byron's personal life from his works questioning the moral qualities of his poetry. The Victorian critic retained the focus on the moral aspect, but also remarked on the melancholic character of his heroes, which they attributed to the effects of the social atmosphere after the French revolution. The twentieth century critics have shown a variety of attitudes towards Byron's canon including *The Giaour*. In the first half of the century, it tends to focus mostly on the development of the Romantic Hero into the Byronic Hero, but also on Byron's concern with political issues. They often discuss the prevalent themes of his works, such as life and death, growth versus stasis and the Doppelgänger pair as representing Byron's dualistic beliefs. The second half of the century is marked by some gender and feminist perspectives discussing the empowering representation of female characters, as well as pointing attention to Byron's critical position towards religion. By the end of the previous century critics have, nevertheless, recognized the artistry, proficiency and integrity of his genius and were responsible for awarding him the supreme position in English Romantic poetry that he deserves.

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