

## A Speech

In Celebration of “Philhellenism and the International Solidarity Day”.

“The Philhellenic Movement, Then and Now. 200 Years Since the Publication of *The Curse of Minerva and Childe Harold*”.

Dr Eugenia Kefallineou

Historian-Archaeologist

I would like to thank Ms Rosa Florou, the President of the Byronic Society, for inviting me to deliver a speech at the major event in the festivities for “Philhellenism and International Solidarity Day”, 19th April, the date on which Lord Byron died in Messolonghi. Our aim is to pay homage to the philhellenes who, like Byron, the greatest philhellene, defended the universal values of freedom, democracy, the respect for human rights, social justice, the respect for art, the protection of cultural heritage and the beauty of nature.

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The term “philhellene” first appeared in Herodotus and concerned the foreign sovereigns who loved Greeks. It also appeared in Plato’s work but in it it concerned the Greek patriots who were interested in the liberation and promotion of their country and its culture. In modern times philhellenism has been an attitude of a spiritual life with reference to Greece. In particular, since the 1750s the philhellenism of the spiritual Europeans connoted admiration and love which culminated with the adoration of ancient Greece and its achievements

in philosophy, literature, art and the other expressions of the spirit. For them the Greeks and their works constituted life models. Winckelmann, the founder of Archaeology, a forerunner of philhellenism wrote in 1757: *"In order to become inimitable we ought to imitate Greek antiquity"*.

This attitude of the philhellenes who swarmed into Greece to get a closer view of antiquity was transformed into action by their decisive moral boost and material support as well as voluntary sacrifice of most of them in the struggle for the Greek Independence. Therefore, the Philhellenic Movement reached its culmination during the Greek Revolution. Since then philhellenism has shown changes and transitions depending on the prevailing circumstances.

Now that universal values are declining owing to globalization and our country is facing one of its severest crises in its history, the messages that emanate from Byron's poetry, ideas, militancy and voluntary sacrifice to the Greek Independence, are topical. Lord Byron, the greatest philhellene is now brought into the limelight by these messages and he marks a new beginning for struggle.

The modern philhellenes' expression of sympathy and solidarity with our suffering country is deeply moving and comes from all over the world. It is compressed into their phrase: *"We are all Greek"*.

This historic phrase is included in the Introduction to Percy Bysshe Shelley's lyrical drama entitled *Hellas*. Shelley, a poet who adored Greece, composed *Hellas* in 1821, when Alexandros Mavrokordatos handed Alexandros Ipsilanti's Proclamation concerning the outbreak of the Greek Revolution to both him and Byron in Pisa, Italy. In *Hellas* Shelley predicted the triumph of Greece and the dominance of the virtues of ancient civilization over the nations and the tyrannies in the modern world. He interpreted his phrase *"We are all Greek"* by writing: *"Our laws, our philology, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece. For,*

*without Greece, Rome – the leader, the conqueror, the metropolis of our ancestors – would not be able to shed any light and we would still be savages and pagans”.*

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The generous tribute we pay to Byron today is due to the completion of 200 years since the publication of two of his philhellenic poems, *Childe Harold* and *The Curse of Minerva*, which are related to the destruction of the Temple of Athena in the Acropolis. Besides, on 27 February 2012, 200 years have been completed since Lord Byron’s maiden speech in support of the weak Luddites in the House of Lords.

Byron, one of the greatest lyrical and satirical poets in the 19th century, was inspired for his philhellenic poetry by the beauty, the sights and monuments of Greece. He first saw them during his first journey which lasted from 29th September 1809 to 22th April 1811. During his journey he had a stopover in Constantinople and the coast of Asia Minor.

The main subject of his philhellenic poetry is Greek nature, the descriptions of its beauties and the praise of the glorious past of Greece in comparison to the insignificant present of his contemporary enslaved Greeks.

The English poet often used this motif in his works as a motive to Modern Greeks, so that he could rekindle renewed fighting and achievements, such as those of their ancestors Leonidas and Themistocles, in order to regain their freedom. He did it because he believed that the Greeks had not lost hope of liberating themselves despite the 400 years of living in slavery. Contrary to other travellers in Greece who considered them dead people.

Byron’s inherently political poetry had classical and romantic elements and influenced the country’s spiritual life during the whole of the 19th century.

Political Byronism has prevailed since then while literary Byronism in philhellenic poetry has functioned as a complement to the political so that it could help disseminate the Byronic messages more easily to the general public.

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Within this context Byron's poetry denounced the removal of the antiquities and the destruction of the Temple of Athena by Elgin, who was then the British Ambassador to Turkey. Thanks to his office, Elgin obtained a firman of the Ottoman Porte on 6 July 1801. It allowed him to plunder the Temple of Athena. The then foreign travellers and worshippers of the ancient Greek civilization and especially Elgin's contemporary compatriots Clarke, Dodwell, Hobhouse and Byron, the then most liberal European voice, protested vigorously when they witnessed the large-scale destruction of the monuments.

Elgin had removed 253 ancient sculpted reliefs and statues besides the small objects. This figure includes metopes and frieze slabs of the Parthenon, statues from the eastern and western pediments, the Caryatid, the exquisite column from the Temple of Erechtheus, the huge statue of Bacchus from the Theatre of Bacchus and so on.

Byron castigated Elgin's sacrilege with *Childe Harold*, canto II, stanzas 11-15, and especially with *the Curse of Minerva* as well as the two epigrams which are ascribed to him.

In the stanzas of *Childe Harold*, which was published first in 1812 and made him famous in one night as he himself wrote ("*I awoke one morning and found myself famous*"), the poet expressed his sadness and indignation at the destruction of the Acropolis monuments. He railed at Elgin who had departed from England to take away the gods of Greece. The notes of the same canto

contain his distinctive statement: “*I have some early prepossession in favor of Greece, and do not think the honor of England advanced by plunder, whether of India or Attica*”.

However, *the Curse of Minerva* is the poem which, in its entirety, inveighed against Elgin’s sacrilege. It is a biting satire composed by Byron at the Capuchins’ Monastery in Plaka, in 1811. It consists of 312 lines and he had it published in a limited number of copies in 1812. In the poem Athena appears sad and indignant at the destruction of her Temple by Elgin. The goddess considers him worse than Alaric of the Goths, who ransacked her town in 395 A.D., and Herostratus who set Artemis’ Temple in Ephesus on fire, and destroyed one of the seven wonders of the World. That is why she curses Elgin, his generation and the country which bore him while she foretells the dissolution of the British empire.

Two epigrams written in Latin, in trenchant Byronic wit, against Elgin are sequels to *The Curse of Minerva*. One of them renders the extent of the destruction:

Quod non fecerunt Goti  
Hoc fecerunt Scoti

The other one entitled “*Carmina Byronis in G. Elgin*” and “*Mimesis*” in Greek is about Elgin’s retribution by Minerva and Venus who caused misery to his health and his relationship to his spouse Mary Elgin.

*The Curse of Minerva* was not among Byron’s best poems. Although he was of this opinion, he never denied or retracted its contents despite the pressure he came under. In 1821, Byron wrote to his publisher Murray: “*I opposed, and will ever oppose the robbery of ruins from Athens to instruct the English in sculpture; but why did they do so? The ruins are as poetical in Piccadilly as they were in the*

*Parthenon; but the Parthenon and its rock are less so without them. Such is the poetry of art”.*

*The Curse of Minerva* and the *cantos of Childe Harold* created a serious moral problem and aroused the indignation of the lovers of beauty and glory of ancient Greece. They moved the Greek public and fortified their fighting spirit for the assertion of their rights. The translations of these works significantly contributed to this as they communicated the message to the Greek general public who could not read them in the original.

The translations of the Byronic works are one of the most important expressions of Byronism in Greece. In the 19th century, at difficult moments of Hellenism, the translations of philhellenic poetry naturally enjoyed the widest circulation and fortified the Greeks’ patriotism. In the 20th century until today their emergence and circulation are offerings of honor to the Greek Revolution fighters among whom Byron is ranked. These mostly coincide with the national anniversaries such as those of the centenary or the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Greek Revolution or Byron’s death. Although these translations have not won aesthetic recognition, they have propagated their Byronic message.

*The Curse of Minerva* has been repeatedly translated into Greek not only in protest at Elgin’s sacrilege but also as a declaration of national rights for the restoration of the Parthenon, the perfect monument of art, which constitutes a symbol of our national cultural identity and Democracy.

Besides the translations, texts by Greek scholars and British officials echo the Byronic poetry concerning the sacrilege of the Parthenon and have maintained the topicality of the issue of the return of the Marbles during the last two centuries.

In 1842, almost 30 years since the composition of *the Curse of Minerva*, Byron's words had the good fortune of being heard in front of the Parthenon from the lips of the then General Secretary of the Archaeological Society Alexandros Rizos Rangabes. They concerned the condemnation of Elgin which was called "a dealer in antiquities", a term which had been used for the first time in the Greek languages. Rangabes was the first to officially protest against the sacrilege as a representative of the then newly-founded Archaeological Society of Athens.

In 1891, Cavafy took a stand for the return of the Acropolis Marbles in the context of informing the Greek public via the press on the heated dispute which had arisen in England and concerned the repatriation of the antiquities between the philosopher and historian Frederic Harrison and the publisher of the periodical *The Nineteenth Century* Knowles. F. Harrison and Knowles used Byron who got caught in the crossfire. Then, Cavafy claimed that "*honesty is the best policy. In the case of the Acropolis Marbles honesty amounts to their restitution*" and warned that "*oblivion results in the death of political or international issues*".

In 1932, Stylianos Seferiades, the Nobel laureate's G. Seferis father, as Professor of International Law at the University of Athens was the first to support the restitution of the antiquities which had been removed from the Acropolis by using legal, moral and artistic arguments. His language echoed the Byronic philhellenic poetry as he himself was a poet who had metrically translated, under the pen name Stephanos Myrtas, a big part of Byron's philhellenic poetry in his book entitled *Lord Byron, His Songs for Greece*. The book contained the translation of *The Curse of Minerva* which was praised by Palamas.

I will not refer to the works of a lot of Greek writers which echo Byron's verse about the antiquities of the Acropolis as their catalogue is long. However, I

should mention two eminent personalities of English diplomacy and politics who are directly connected with Byron.

The one is the diplomat Harold Nicolson who in 1924 served in the British Embassy in Athens during the commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Byron's death. He was also collecting historical material for his book entitled *Byron. The Last Journey, April 1823-1824*.

Harold Nicolson proposed to the then Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Ramsay Macdonald that the British Government should return the Caryatid and the Erechtheium column to Greece in order to honor Byron. His proposal was rejected owing to the intransigent English policy. Nicolson, however, continued making a stand for the restitution of the antiquities as long as he lived. He contributed a lot of articles and interpolations to the press even in the 1960s.

The other Briton was Michael Foot, the former leader of the Labour Party, who, in 1986, on the occasion of the commemoration preparations which would take place in Britain in 1988 for the bicentenary of Byron's birth, proposed that the House of Commons should grant the Greek request for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles that Melina Merkouri had submitted to UNESCO since 1982. Michael Foot rightly painted out: *"One of the things that we shall celebrate in 1988 is the spirit in which Byron looked forward to the ensuing century and more, and foresaw a different role for our country from the one that we were performing at that time. He looked forward to an age when our country would be speaking in the name of freedom, not in the name of an imperial power. He looked forward to the time when we would be able to show our common heritage with all those other countries"*. However, this proposal was rejected. Since then for two decades until 2009 there has been heightened activity for the achievement of a resolution to the national issue which is not only political but has also developed into a cultural one. This important evolution is due to the fact that the British public

opinion has swung in favor of the return of the antiquities, as repeated opinion polls have shown in recent years.

During this period and specifically in 2000, while the new Acropolis Museum was being built, the Greek Government proposed to the British Authorities that the sculptures of the Parthenon should be lent on a long-term basis in exchange for other antiquities on equal terms in view of the Athens Olympic Games, in 2004. The British Museum, however, rejected the proposal.

It is worth noting that on 16 January 2004 the then British MP Richard Allan started the "*Parthenon 2004 Campaign*" besides other relevant activities. The philhellenic politician launched the campaign with more than 100 MPs, notables and academics from Great Britain and aimed at mobilizing the British citizens to exert pressure on their representatives so that they could vote for the repatriation of the antiquities of the Parthenon. Richard Allan stated: "*The return of the Marbles is a moral issue. The Marbles should be returned for reasons of sensitivity. These sculptures are a source of moral pride and an element of the Greek's national identity*".

In 2008, the New Museum of the Acropolis was finally erected and in June 2009 it was inaugurated with the aim of highlighting not only its exhibits but also what is missing from its collection. Thus it exerts pressure on the British Museum and demolishes the powerful until then argument of the Britons that there is not any suitable Greek museum that could house the Parthenon antiquities.

However, the British Museum reacted unfavorably again and stated that "*it presents a unique panorama of world civilization and the Marbles of the Parthenon are an inseparable part of it*". This ignored the strong Greek claim that "*the Parthenon sculptures which are found in the British Museum constitute an integral part of an edifice and when they are placed next to the remaining*

*sculptures of the Parthenon they narrate a story, the Panathenaea Procession*". Since then, however, the Greek State has not made any other remarkable move.

During this critical period for the country, the philhellenes have partly made up for lost time. The International Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles have sent an open letter to the British Prime Minister David Cameron in an effort to enlist the support of the British Government for the repatriation of the Marbles. A lot of committees from other countries are mobilized in the same direction. The British writer, director, actor, columnist and broadcaster Stephen Fry, a philhellene, used the occasion of the 2012 London Olympics to step up pressure on the British Government for the restitution of the Parthenon antiquities. He proposed that *"Britain should redress a great wrong by using the occasion of the 2012 London Olympics and give up the fifth-century BC masterpieces... What greater gesture could be made to Greece in its appalling finance distress?"*.

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Byron, however, remains topical not only as an accuser of the looting of the Parthenon and the unresolved national issue of the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles but also, in the current multi-dimensional global crisis whose consequences Greece faces up to, with his maiden speech in the House of Lords on 27th February 1812, 200 years ago. In his speech Byron supported the insurgent Nottingham knitters, the Luddites, who destroyed labour-saving textile machinery which diminished their employment. Byron was the only peer who voted against the Bill which would make the breaking of a stocking frame punishable by hanging. In doing so he was protesting against social injustice and supporting the weak.

Not long ago the “Byron League for Philhellenism and Culture” disseminated Byron’s maiden speech in Greek, which indicates how topical it is if we consider the ongoing Greek and international financial crisis.

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It is evident that the messages emerging from the poetry, ideas and voluntary sacrifice of the philhellene poet and “ Citizen of the World” as Byron called himself are diachronic and always topical as the Byronic verse is inspired by the universal values of morality, justice, freedom, respect for human rights as well as by the protection of our cultural heritage and the environment.