

Lord Byron and *Wuthering Heights*: Representations of the (Anti)-Heroine

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After the death of the nineteenth-century literary lion, Byron's authorial aura reached the Victorians in numerous ways. From Carlyle and Tennyson to the Brontë's reading and fascination with Byron's work and personality, one quick overview of Victorian literature can reveal striking influences; an instance is the posthumous fashion launched by the dark Byronic hero for equally charming and repulsive male protagonists who have become similarly notorious for their satanic and mysterious temperament. In the Turkish Tales, however, the deviant Byronic hero coexists and in fact acquires significance from different types of belles that have drawn the attention of the critics; it is interesting to note how Byron displays his ambivalent views on issues of gender by representing heroines in contrasting ways. This paper tackles exactly this contrasting portrait of the female in Byron's *The Corsair* (1814) and examines how this portrait can be paralleled, even re-inscribed in the picture of a Victorian heroine like Catherine Earnshaw from Emily Brontë's transgressing novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Specifically, I aim to focus on power relations in both kinds of writing and how these are transformed into coexisting conforming and dismissive comments on contemporary concerns.

Any study on gender issues should move along the lines of acknowledging the distinction between sex and gender; Anne Mellor carefully sets the basis for her arguments by distinguishing between sex as biologically based and gender as "the socially constructed roles and functions allotted to an individual on the basis of perceived sexual difference" (17). In her research on gender and Romanticism, Mellor exemplifies the ways in which the canonical

male Romantic poets paint the picture of the female self by objectifying it and assuming its voice, leaving it practically without existence (19). Byron is certainly not missing from the picture; although largely unconventional, more often than not he sketches passive, female heroines and imagines them in the manner of *Don Juan*'s (1819-1824) aristocratic narrator, who remarks that "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, / 'Tis woman's whole existence" (*CPW* V, 1.194 1545-46).¹

Indeed, romantic love can be deemed the reason for both the life *and* the death of heroines like Medora from Byron's *The Corsair*: following Zuleika from *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), a "child of gentleness" (*CPW* III, 1.7.193)² albeit sexually more liberated towards her ostensible brother, Medora belongs in a family of angelically sketched heroines, typically secluded within the domestic realm. Caroline Franklin, whose study sets guidelines for a careful examination of Byron's heroines, confirms that ". . . the male speakers [in Byron's *Tales*] construct the feminine in terms of natural beauty, passivity, and vulnerability" (41). Delicate, fair, and romantic, Medora is idealised insofar as she fulfils the male fantasy of the feminine, conquerable yet impenetrable other that inspires a kind of maddening, obsessive love for the male protagonist. It is her kind of seclusion, the "tender blue of that large loving eye" (*CPW* III, 1.15.493),³ her "ray of beauty" (*CPW* III, 1.16.512) that casts its charm on Conrad, as well as her complete immersion in her love as she persists in waiting for him to return from his adventurous travels, that impose upon her the conventionality of the

¹ Extracts from Byron's *Don Juan* are taken from: Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *Don Juan. The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Vol. V. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1986. Print. Quoted as *CPW*.

² Taken from: Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *The Bride of Abydos. The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Vol. III. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1986. 107-147. Print

³ All extracts from Byron's *The Corsair* are taken from: Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *The Corsair. The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Vol. III. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1986. 148-214. Print

submissive female: “Still would I rise to rouse the beacon fire,” she says, “Lest spies less true should let the blaze expire; / And many a restless hour outwatched each star, / And morning came – and still thou wert afar” (*CPW* III, 1.14.377-380). Throughout the poem, evidently, Medora is represented as a passionate and devoted yet passive and delicate upholder of the domestic sphere, what Franklin has termed “an Oriental version of the ‘angel of the house’ ideal” (65). Nigel Leask groups her with eighteenth-century “heroines of sensibility” who are characteristically emotional, passive and devoted (238).

However, although the love is reciprocal, her marriage to Conrad is far from a relationship of equals; it is definitely not the kind of marital relationship that authors like Jane Austen opt for in their writings, namely the kind of rapport predicated on Mary Wollstonecraft’s ethic of marriage grounded on “rational love, mutual understanding, and respect” (Mellor 53). Though grateful and respectful towards Darcy, which is after all what is naturally expected from her in her position as a wife, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) comments upon her marriage that “a woman may take liberties with her husband” (297). Similarly, Elinor and Edward in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) ground their marriage on mutual respect and cooperation. This is not the case with Medora and Conrad; Medora is restrained, and “Conrad’s ‘love’” McDayter argues, “is based principally on his power to control her” (96). What we are made alert to is Conrad’s declared conformity to a uniform patriarchal discourse that sets the female roaming within her own confines. As a result, divisions between the feminine and the masculine are retained and the separation of the public and domestic spaces remains clear-cut; Conrad refuses to resign himself to a settled domestic life: In Medora’s words, “Would that these days were over! Wilt thou ne’er, / My Conrad! Learn the joys of peace to share?” (*CPW* III, 1.14.388-389).

Power relations between the two characters may ideologically be faithful to Romantic representations of male-female relationships that absorb the female into the egotistical male self. The ideology of nineteenth-century society was, after all, built upon very clear-cut distinctions between the two sexes and their associations. Edmund Burke, for instance, is famous for his association of the masculine with the powerful sublime and the feminine with feebleness, beauty and delicacy in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757): “The beauty of women,” he contends, “is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy” (116). However, although Byron is definitely not excluded from this tendency of the male Romantic poets, he disturbs it in unfamiliar ways at the same time as he embraces it. What this means is that he subtly endorses a sharp commentary on gender distinctions; more than that, he introduces a female anti-type to the Byronic hero that upsets gender relations. Gulnare is, like Leila from *The Giaour* (1813), both a harem Queen and a slave: unlike Leila, however, she is transformed from a “trembling fair” (*CPW* III, 2.6.226) into a revolutionary body that kills the Sultan, frees the by now helpless Corsair and demands freedom: In her own words, “What, am I then a toy for dotard’s play, / To wear but till the gilding frets away?” (*CPW* III, 3.8.342-343). Following a socio-political interpretation, Franklin associates Gulnare with revolutionary force (82), specifically one whose duality displays both Byron’s fascination and his anxiety for “popular revolt” (79).

Gulnare is practical and efficient in her actions with “the firmness of the female hand” (*CPW* III, 3.8.381) and the narrative is essentially based upon her own initiative. Like *The Giaour*, the poem is, in McDayter’s view, “both a strong plea for female sexual autonomy and an acknowledgement of the inevitable condition of woman” (47). Like Brontë after him, Byron’s adherence to passion works as a warning against any obstacle for the pursuit of freedom; Gulnare is the first fully active heroine in Byron’s Tales and stands for a liberating,

radical sexuality that shows both in the open declaration of her love and in what Franklin has named the “wildness of female passion” (83). Such radicalism, however, can be two-faced for Byron: in Conrad’s eyes, Gulnare has become “Gulnare, the homicide!” (*CPW* III, 3.13.463), marked by the “spot of blood, that light but guilty streak” that “banished all the beauty from her cheek!” (*CPW* III, 3.10.426-7); as a symbol of the madness of revolutionary fervour and intense sexuality, she has lost the feminine qualities that form her charm and delicacy. Being completely free, therefore, she cannot meet the expectations required by a typically ideal and vulnerable female other, ever to be possessed by the powerful male. In terms of gender relations, she embodies the double face of the female in Byron’s mind; “her determined role in releasing Conrad from Pacha’s prison,” as Fiona MacCarthy suggests in her biography of Byron, “reflects Byron’s own awareness, his half-horrified half-fascinated interest, in the vocal, freedom-seeking women amongst his own contemporaries, the liberated Lady Oxford being a case in point” (216).

Indeed, viewed from a biographical perspective, Byron’s social circle during his years of fame and subsequently included women of high intellectual standing; Lady Oxford, Lady Melbourne, Madame de Staël, even Caroline Lamb who was characterized by Byron as having “an indefatigable & active spirit of meanness & destruction about her” (*SLJ* 112)⁴ are among some of the highly educated women with whom Byron associated and whom he admittedly admired. As MacCarthy affirms, “[t]hough he pretended an aversion to well-educated women this was not so in practice” (186); he even praised the literary attempts of his future wife Anabella Milbanke and acknowledged her firm capacity for thought: as he

⁴ Extracts from Byron’s letters and journals are taken from: Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals*. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. Print.

himself admitted in his correspondence with Lady Lamb, “who would imagine so much strength & variety of thought under that placid countenance?” (*SLJ* 59). Obviously, however, his admiration is artfully coalesced with a statement that tempers it down: “There is something to me very softening in the presence of a woman, – some strange influence [...] which I cannot at all account for, having no very high opinion of the sex” (*SLJ* 259). Indeed, talking about Byron and gender, and taking *Don Juan* and Julia’s letter to Juan as an example, Adriana Craciun acknowledges that the poet’s misogynistic attitude is always somehow coupled with his sympathetic response (158).

It is this same ambiguity that permeates his handling of gender in the poem: while Gulnare inspires admiration, in the end she is finally resigned to her inferior place as a woman. In the finale of the poem, “She drops her veil, and stands in silence by” (*CPW* III, 3.16.517) with no other option but the maintenance of her status as a female to secure her mode of control; to do otherwise would mean monstrosity or death.⁵ It is such deathly end that meets Medora who is no longer the sole object of Conrad’s desire from the moment he kisses Gulnare: now “o’er the eye death exerts his might, / And hurls the spirit from her throne of light” (*CPW* III, 3.20.611-612). The poem skilfully marries conventional gender taboos with the unconventional and the story is completed by a final reconciliation: Byron has Gulnare settle with the idea that in order to maintain control over her own self, she must evade society’s stigmatization (McDayter 101).

⁵ Gulnare’s liberal attitude echoes Lady Macbeth from William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1623) and her active part both before and after the king’s murder: “Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures” (2.2.52-53). Eventually, however, when Macbeth learns of his wife’s death, he confirms her fate: “She should have died hereafter” (5.5.17).

This paradoxicality is what makes Byron's heroines curiously interesting; both sympathetic to female condition *and* conscious of preponderant nineteenth-century stereotypes that could not be overlooked or overpowered, Byron manifests his own ambivalent position in matters of gender. On the one hand, he remains true to the ideology of a characteristically "masculine" Romanticism (a term coined by Mellor in her influential book *Romanticism and Gender*) that, as Mellor argues, effects "a split between the subject and the object," namely the male and the female, and finally "re-gender[s] both the subject and the object as male and in the process erase[s] the female from discourse" (19). In this Byron follows a whole tradition of male Romantic poets from William Wordsworth to Percy Shelley who advocated male supremacy; in his *Essay On Love* (1818) the latter makes a case for a female "antitype," namely "a mirror of one's soul whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness" (1109). On the other hand, Byron transgresses this tendency by questioning and even violating the rigidly traditional portrait of the feminine as submissive and silent either by representations of the anti-heroine type like Gulnare, or by discreetly condemning patriarchal behaviour, social restrictions and their inevitable effects on individual freedom. It is this same kind of Romantic duality with respect to gender that many years later would reappear in the work of a novelist very much influenced by Byron; Emily Brontë's representations of the female self in *Wuthering Heights* expose her Byronic tendency to both uphold and dismiss ideologies.

It is true that *Wuthering Heights* is a novel about Byronic passion and subversion in all its might. Revolving around the peculiar bond between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, it is a work that can be characterised as inherently Romantic with overtones of Victorian realism. Lyn Pykett analyses this kind of mixing by commenting upon the role of the Romantic/Gothic in the novel: "Female Gothic" she underlines, "enacts fantasies of

female power in the heroine's courage and enterprise, while simultaneously, or by turns, representing the female condition as both confinement and refuge" (3). She goes on to explain that there is this kind of merging in the novel of the Gothic and the domestic as the domestic becomes the generative power of the Gothic (5) and the family becomes the "site of primitive passions, violence, struggle and control" (7). The Gothic resolutely points to female empowerment as well as female imprisonment. The familiarization with this technique clears the ground for a close examination of the main heroine's psyche as she keeps moving back and forth physically and metaphorically between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Catherine Earnshaw, a beautiful young girl with the "sweetest smile, and lightest foot in the parish" (36),⁶ passes through her childhood as wild and unrestrained, "a wild, wicked slip" (36) as Nelly calls her, passionate and devoted to Heathcliff with whom she became inseparable; at one point Nelly even remarks that "[t]he greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him" (36). Together, they would prefer roaming the countryside, growing up "as rude as savages" (40) and dismissing all restrictions "the minute they were together [. . .] at least the minute they had contrived some naughty play of revenge" (40); they would rebel against everything including what F. B. Pinion refers to as "the tyranny of Calvinistic Joseph" (211).

The period of Catherine's stay at Wuthering Heights – a standing symbol of wildness and gothic transgression – marks a period of fierceness that disdains social norms and comes to be juxtaposed by a subsequently tamed, grown-up Catherine, mistress of the civilised world of Thrushcross Grange; a "[f]ierce battle" is enacted, according to Mellor, "between erotic desire and civilisation" (191). Romantic contrariety rewrites upon Catherine the battle between passion and reason, between the Gothic in the domestic realm and social

⁶ All extracts from Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* are taken from: Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Ed. Ian Jack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.

expectations and that happens both within *Wuthering Heights*, *and* in the interaction between these two contrasting worlds. Catherine's stay at Thrushcross Grange after the spraining of her ankle inaugurates society's inscription upon her female body and her inescapable transformation: Mellor names such transformation into a proper lady "a fall, a crippling, a self-division" (197). She is asked to become a symbol of domesticity, another Medora whose ideality will set the dividing line between the realm of the home and the outside world.

From that moment onwards Catherine enters psychic confusion that projects itself unto her own female body as small but stable steps towards hysteria. It seems like death is the only option that will allow her to resolve this frustrated hovering between the uncouth Heathcliff and the cultured Edgar, the difference between whom "resembled what you see in exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful fertile valley" (61). For a woman like Catherine that "never had power to conceal her passion" (62) but always subconsciously kept herself in pursuit of her sole object of desire, Heathcliff means life, even if she herself admits to their peculiar circumstances: their love is "a source of little visible delight, but necessary" (73). Mellor comments that "[s]eparated from Heathcliff, from nature, from her own spirit/soul, Catherine cannot live" (198). It is true that Brontë's novel explores the dynamics of passion and desire just as Byron's work offers, in Andrew Elfenbein's view, the kind of desire that flourishes in the "forbidden" (70). The instability of Catherine in the absence of Heathcliff, which is turned into madness upon his arrival, is the direct result of the tension of love unfulfilled and condemned by social standards. Especially for a woman, the pursuit of individual desire can be realised at the expense of either social stigmatization or death: it is this same end that would await Gulnare, and Emily Brontë, like Byron, acknowledges feminine restrictions even as she dismisses them. Like Gulnare, Catherine's options are limited; death comes as an absolver and the only possible escape from her condition. In the

end, they unite by escaping into a mystical world away from the restrictions of the body. What this signifies, in Mellor's view, is that their love can be fulfilled only with the destruction of "bodily difference" (194) and Catherine reappears before Lockwood in the shape of a little girl, free from the prison of a woman's body. What Lockwood sees is the only real Catherine, as Wendy A. Craik argues, namely, a child yet to be divided from Heathcliff, from her own self (165).

Despite this feminine concern about the female condition, however, Emily Brontë crosses the boundaries. Just as Byron deviates from what Mellor calls masculine Romanticism and goes for more ambiguous representations of the female, Emily Brontë attempts something analogous, namely a movement from the representation of a domesticated body into more complex portraiture of female personality: Catherine's heart belongs with the free, yet her state is even more complex. Following the realization that "[w]omen within patriarchal culture can only be represented as monsters who desire or as passive objects of male desire" (McDayter 100), comes Catherine's image as a desiring self that reflects itself into the idealised beloved; as Mellor demonstrates, the projection fits perfectly with the self-absorbed kind of romantic Eros (195). This subversion of gender definitions is part of the whole Gothic layer of the novel that keeps in focus all its repressed energy, an expressively Gothic energy that invites, as Nicola Trott argues, the "*unresolved* argument between rationality and more suggestible and mysterious states of mind" (485). Heathcliff is transformed from a patriarchal figure into an object-to-be-desired for Catherine, an entity inseparable from her own self: "he's more myself than I am," Catherine confesses, "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (71). In this Emily Brontë "more closely approximate[s] masculine Romanticism than feminine" (Mellor 186), and while she culminates her story with the Cathy-Hareton living-happily-ever-after domestic

subplot, what in fact prevails is the subversive force of the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship: according to Meg Williams, “[p]urged temporarily of its perverse elements, it [the Gothic] remains a source of unconscious energy” (13).

Both obviously writers of ambiguous female portraits, Lord Byron and Emily Brontë often upset gender boundaries in their attempt to depict complex personalities. Especially after the French Revolution, it is a fact that all things were “Thrown topsy-turvy” (*Don Juan*, *CPW* V, 9.37.292) including the way gender relations were defined. Craciun underlines this “[r]evolutionary fervour” that “destabilized gender and sexual roles” (155) and upset firm boundaries between the masculine and the feminine. In their writings Byron and Brontë – both progressive authorial voices that do not hesitate to display this kind of demarcation as well as blur it – often mix the masculine and the feminine to create liquid female representations that are far from mundane and that confirm and question entrenched patriarchal discourses. Indeed, Medora and Gulnare, the heroine and the anti-heroine, are revived in the character of a complex Victorian heroine that finally signals, like them, the argument and the counter-argument.

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