

## BYRON'S DOMESTIC PIECES MADE KNOWN

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Byron's two poems *Fare Thee Well* and *A Sketch* or *Sketch from Private Life* were composed within an interval of twelve days regarding the same family circumstances. There are diverse ties that make the poems so closely connected and estranged from each other at the same time. *Fare Thee Well* was written on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1816, while on March 29, 1816 Byron wrote his *Sketch*. The first of the poems is addressed to his wife Annabella Milbanke where he wishes farewell to his wife in the most compassionate and touching ways during the storm of their separation. *Sketch* is an attack on Annabella's female servant Mrs. Clermont where Byron vengefully accuses the nurse as involved in the causes of their separation. Thus, we can observe common lineaments that enable us to draw parallels between the two poems. Both of them refer to the period of separation of Byron from his wife with whom he wed on January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1815 and the entailing divorce issues that kept the public attention vigilant on any minute instances of the relationship between high society couple. The two *Poems of Separation*, as they are commonly referred to, also experienced similar destiny of publication. Both of them were intended to be distributed among the small group of the recipients, "to be sent to the initiated".

However, the pieces soon became the public property and were pirated in *the Champion* on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1816, a Tory paper ready to embark criticism on the Whig poet. The publication of the controversial poems sparked off a wave of disapproval in the moralistic circles and brought forth a heavy criticism. Byron could well foresee such a reception; therefore his intention was to distribute the poems to the small group of initiated, to the cycle of the most intimate friends. In his *Letters and Journals of Lord*

Byron, Thomas Moore, Byron's closest friend and one of the earliest biographers, accounts that it hasn't been "from any wish or intention of his own, but through the injudicious zeal of a friend whom he had suffered to take a copy, that the verses met the public eye" (Moore 1830: 664)<sup>[i]</sup>. In his preface to the poems Coleridge<sup>[iii]</sup>, puts it this way, "If he had hoped that the verses would slip into a newspaper, as it were, he would surely have taken care that the seed fell on good ground under the favoring influence of Perry of the *Morning Chronicle*, or Leigh Hunt of the *Examiner*" (WLB, vol III, 1904: 532). While Harriet Beecher Stowe<sup>[iii]</sup>, the authoress of *Lady Byron Vindicated*, takes a more radical stance claiming that Byron sent the poems to his intimates with an acknowledgment and a solid intention that they would be published. Lady Byron's advocate says, "These "imprudent friends" have all along been such a marvelous convenience to Lord Byron" (Stowe 1870: 23).

Thus, the first of the *Domestic Pieces* was *Fare thee well*, Byron's first, but not the last poem addressed to his wife. In one of the letters written after March 20, 1816 and addressed to Annabella Milbanke Byron for the first time mentions about the poem, "Dearest Bell, I send you the first verses that ever I attempted to write upon you, and perhaps the last that I may ever write at all. This at such a moment may look like affectation, but it is not so. The language of all nations nearest to a state or nature is said to be Poetry. I know not, how this may be; but this I know. You know that the lover, the lunatic, and the, poet are "of imagination all compact." I am afraid you have hitherto seen me only as the two first, but I would fain hope there is nothing in the last to add to any grievances you may have against the former" (Byron to Lady Byron, March 20th-25th 1816, pdf 06, p. 144<sup>[iv]</sup>).

Byron's *Fare Thee Well* consists of 15 stanzas written in the ABAB rhyme scheme. Beginning from the first stanza Byron mourns his family life which was destroyed by the malice of the world that pushed Lady Byron to "inflict a cureless wound" to his bared breast. He is desperate that their unity can no longer exist and "the undying thought which paineth" tells him they "no more may meet". He speculates on the future of his new born child, whether his name would be reminded to his daughter, although "his care she must forego". Byron's pride, "which not a world could bow" shrinks before Lady Byron, the one who "all his faults perchance" knows. Nevertheless, he

realizes that they are doomed to be “disunited” and “torn from every nearer tie”. Although completely aware that “all words are idle and vainer still”, Byron is compelled to yield to his “unbridling thoughts” before bidding his final farewell “seared in heart and blighted”.

In reference to the touching mood dominating the poem Moore accounts that at first he regarded *Fare Thee Well* as “a mere showy effusion of sentiment” but after reading Byron’s Memoranda and his Lordship’s version of his controversial marital life and circumstances he felt as if he had “in common with a large portion of the public, done him injustice”. In his *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, Moore or Byron’s “father confessor” (in one of his letters to Moore Byron addresses him this way) writes that in his Memoranda his Lordship “described, and in a manner whose sincerity there was no doubting, the swell of tender recollections under the influence of which, as he sat one night musing in his study, these stanzas were produced,—the tears, as he said, falling fast over the paper as he wrote them” (Moore 1830: 664). In his *Works of Lord Byron* Ernest Hartley Coleridge comments, “It must have been a fair and complete copy that Moore saw. There are no tear-marks on this draft, which must be the first, for it is incomplete, and every line (almost) tortured with alterations” (WLB, vol. III, 1904: 537, Footnote I).

The sympathetic tone of *Fare Thee Well* was thus amicably received by the more favourable public circles. In its publication of the poem on the April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1816, *the Courier*, inserted a quote from a “fair correspondent” supposedly, Madame de Staël, French authoress and one of Byron’s admirers, where she said that if “her husband had bade her such a farewell she could not have avoided running into his arms, and being reconciled immediately” (WLB, vol. III, 1904: 534).

Apart from more or less sympathetic reception among Byron’s proponents, unfavorable reactions also made headlines. *The Times* regarded “... the whining stanzas of *Fare Thee Well*,” along with *A Sketch* as “an injurious fabrication”, while Wordsworth on receiving *the Champion* of April 14<sup>th</sup> impeaches the editor of the newspaper, John Scott, of being “under some delusion as to the merits of Lord Byron’s poetry, and treat the wretched verses, the *Fare Well*, with far too much respect. They

are disgusting in sentiment, and in execution contemptible. “Though my many faults deface me etc”. Can worse doggerel than such a stanza be written? One verse is commendable: “All my madness none can know”” (William Wordsworth to John Scott, from Rydal Mount, April 18th 1816, pdf 06, p. 163).

While the reception of *Fare Thee Well* was swaying from one extreme to the other, the common reaction to *A Sketch* was unanimously disheartening. After its initial publication in the Tory *Champion*, unlike its companion, *Fare Thee Well*, *A Sketch* was banned to appear in a number of other London journals given its “low malignity and miserable doggerel” as stated by the Times (WLB, vol. III, 1904: 534). For the first time *A Sketch* was permitted to find its authorized publication in Byron’s collection of poems only in 1819. Although the poem is a vicious address to the female servant, there is a common held belief that in fact it is a hidden attack towards Byron’s mother-in-law, Lady Milbanke, whom Byron suspected to evoke the discord between him and his wife.

After its publication in *The Champion*, *A Sketch* brought about a widespread storm of criticism and wave of attack on the author of the slanderous verses. Claire Clermont, who has already started chasing Byron, in one of her letters where she goes on asking Byron for another meeting, writes the following, “If you refuse I shall think I am a person equally disgusting to you as the unfortunate “Governess.” In one thing I am sure I am unlike her; I would not displease or contradict you for the world...” (Claire Clairmont to Byron, March or April 1816; pdf 06, p. 156).

It is commonly asserted of Byron that he best writes when he writes of himself giving voice to his personal emotions and sentiments. Byron was a man of excesses and it was typical of his character to go the extremes when driven away by the embarrassments coming from all the corners in one of the critical periods of his life “at a moment when my health was declining, my fortune embarrassed, and my mind had been shaken by many kinds of disappointment... While I was yet young, and might have reformed what might be wrong in my conduct, and retrieved what was perplexing in my affairs...” (Byron to John Murray, from Bologna, June 7th 1819, pdf 10, p. 124).

In such an embarrassing state of mind Byron wrote *A Sketch* directed towards Mrs. Clermont, Annabella Milbanke’s nurse and confidante. Sharon Turner, writer for

the *Quarterly Review*, in a letter to John Murray, Byron's publisher, writes the following, "There are some expressions in the poem that I think are libelous, and the severe tenor of the whole would induce a jury to find them to be so. The question only remains, to whom it is applicable. It certainly does not itself name the person. But the legal pleadings charge that innuendo must mean such a person..." (Sharon Turner to John Murray, April 3rd 1816, pdf 06, p. 157). On April 9th 1816, Byron received a letter from Mrs. Clermont who requests Byron "to be made acquainted with the grounds" on which she has been charged with bitter accusations and further expresses "no doubt of being able to prove in the most satisfactory manner that such accusations are wholly unfounded" (Mrs. Clermont to Byron, April 9th 1816, pdf 06, p. 158).

*A Sketch* is written in all the power of malice and spleen and invites an aura of dark sensations on the reader. Byron shouts words of spite and malevolence towards the ignoble nurse standing on his higher pedestal of a nobleman. Nevertheless, in his excesses of bad temper Byron fails to exercise a noble restraint and control over his emotions. Byron, who used to pride himself of being descended from the William the Conqueror<sup>[v]</sup>, in *Sketch* explicitly expresses his disdain for the lowborn servant Mrs. Clermont with the harshest words, "Born in the garret, in the kitchen bred, /Promoted thence to deck her mistress' head.../ Raised from the toilette to the table, where/ Her wondering betters wait behind her chair/ With eye unmoved, and forehead unabash'd, / She dines from off the plate she lately wash'd (*A Sketch, Lines 1-2, 5-8*). Byron shifts bitter accusations on "the only infant's earliest governess" for raising Annabella as "a foe to all vice, yet hardly virtue's friend". It is interesting to insert one of Byron's own observations on a point that his wife was an only child just like him. In one of his journals Byron writes, "I have been thinking of an odd circumstance. My daughter (1), my wife (2), my half-sister (3), my mother (4), my sister's mother (5), my natural daughter (6), and myself (7), are, or were, all *only* children... Such a complication of *only* children, all tending to one family, is singular enough, and looks like fatality almost." He then adds, "But the fiercest animals have the fewest numbers in their litters, as lions, tigers, and even elephants, which are mild in comparison." (Moore 1830: 7)

Byron was well aware of his sins and faults which he also acknowledges in *Fare Thee Well* ("Though my many faults defaced me") and the virtuous righteousness of

Annabella Milbanke, the pupil of Mrs. Clermont's art and upbringing, was driving him mad. Although being "serenely purest of her sex" she was "wanting one sweet weakness--to forgive", says Byron of Annabella in his Sketch, and adds, "Too shock'd at faults her soul can never know, /She deems that all could be like her below (*A Sketch, Lines 32-34*).

With succeeding lines Byron's malice and spleen reaches higher points and his malevolent comparisons regarding the female servant shock by their intensity of emotion. "If like a snake she steal within your walls", says Byron, "Till the black slime betray her as she crawls; /If like a viper to the heart she wind, /And leave the venom there she did not find (*A Sketch, Lines 47-50*). It is interesting to notice that the voice from the *Incantation* in *Manfred* uses the same associations with snake and poison as a powerful symbol of malice, such as in the following lines from *Incantation*, "From thy own smile I snatched the snake, /For there it coiled as in a brake; /From thy own lip I drew the charm/ Which gave all these their chiefest harm; / In proving every poison known, / I found the strongest was thine own (*Manfred, Part I, Incantation, Lines 236-241*).

The whole intensity of spite directed towards Mrs. Clermont demonstrates the state of a really woeful heart and mind. It seems the painful poet tries to calm down by just uttering all the angriness and malice accumulated inside his soul and although initially targeted towards the nurse the poem turns into an attack to the three women of the Millbanke family. The climax of the spleen reaches its highest point from the line 46 up to the line 78 where in 32 lines Byron sheds a really disheartening mood. The vocabulary used is very illustrative of this point, the nouns like *snake, slime, viper, venom, hag, evil, hell, mendacity, falsehood, web and wile, mud, centipede, scorpion, reptile, monster*, as well as the verbs *steal, crawl, lurk, scheme, conceal, ooze, stagnate*, and adjectives like *black, bloodless and dark* permeate the lines effusing a morbid effect on the reader. It is curious to pay attention to the atmosphere that certain references to color add to the general tone of the poem. It is the color of "black slime" of a snake, the drab coloration of the "centipede in saffron mail" or the "darker greenness of the scorpion's scale".

The darkest aura of the poem is further intentionally augmented through the introduction of allusions dealing with morbid themes:

- the place where the nurse dwells is compared to Pandemonium [the capital of [Hell](#) in John Milton's [Paradise Lost](#)] and the nurse herself is referred to as Hecate [the patron of the underworld, night, and witchcraft]; "To make a Pandemonium where she dwells,/And reign the Hecate of domestic hells?" (*Lines 53-54*)
- her hypocrite look "with a cheek of parchment and an eye of stone" is compared to a vile mask baser even for Gorgon Medusa, [the chief of Gorgon sisters whose appearance turned the beholder to stone];  
  
"... without feeling, mock at all who feel: /With a vile mask the Gorgon would disown" (*Lines 63-64*)
- Mrs. Clermont is further compared with the Dog-Star, or Sirius [the [brightest star](#) in the night sky, that was believed to affect dogs to behave abnormally during hot weather further causing human deaths] like in the following lines, "This female dog-star of her little sky, /Where all beneath her influence droop or die" (*Lines 77-78*).

The tensed climax of the narration comes to its resolution at the point of a bitter curse which Byron casts on Mrs. Clermont and all her "less abhorr'd compeers" to be "festering in the infamy of years"; Byron says;

May the strong curse of crush'd affections light  
Back on thy bosom with reflected blight!  
And make thee in thy leprosy of mind  
As loathsome to thyself as to mankind!  
Till all thy self-thoughts curdle into hate,  
Black--as thy will for others would create:  
Till thy hard heart be calcined into dust,  
And thy soul welter in its hideous crust.  
Oh, may thy grave be sleepless as the bed,  
The widow'd couch of fire, that thou hast spread!

Then, when thou fain wouldst weary Heaven with prayer,  
Look on thine earthly victims--and despair!

*A Sketch* in all its ill-fame contained several ideas that permeated Byron's works of the subsequent years. It is easy to see traces of the curse-dominated disposition in Byron's later dramas written after leaving England, particularly in *Manfred* when the voice from Incantation "pours the vial" of his curse on Manfred's head (*Manfred, Lines 252-261*), or in *Cain* when Eve diffuses his woe on seeing Abel's death in the bitter forms of a curse (*Cain, Lines 419-443*). In the finishing lines of his *Sketch* Byron dooms for the female servant to go "Down to the dust!--and, as thou rott'st away, /Even worms shall perish on thy poisonous clay".

After receiving the aforementioned letter from Mrs. Clermont Byron wrote a letter addressed to Anabella Milbanke in which he goes on demonstrating his cold and loathsome attitude towards the servant and once again turns to curses while referring to her. Byron says in this letter, "The curse of my Soul light upon her & hers forever! – may my Spirit be deep upon her in her life – & in her death – may her thirst be unquenchable – & her wretchedness irrevocable – may she see herself only & eternally – may the fulfillment of her wishes become the destruction of her hopes – may she dwell in the darkness of her own heart & shudder – now & for existence. – – Her last food will be the bread of her enemies. – – I have said it" and concludes the letter by saying "To you dearest Bell – I am as ever very truly Byron" (To Lady Byron, from 13 Piccadilly Terrace London, April 10th 1816, pdf 06, 158).

These two *Domestic Pieces* or *Poems of Separation* although written in twelve days of interval and by the hand of the same poet thus express completely different disposition of the poet. If we would try to read the poems on their own, without the biographical instances attached to each of them, we would thus have completely different reactions. It would be apparently surprising for an average reader of poetry who comes across to these pieces to be put into knowledge that both poems were written by the same author. However, this is what is so typical of Byron and his writing, the poet who himself didn't have much regard for his own belles letters considering them as mere scribbling, damnable works and somehow getting surprised at the readers'



reaction and admiration. Although for the sake of the truth it should be stated Byron acknowledged, as he put it, “the temporary partiality of what is called “the public”. In another instance his Lordship refers to that public as “rascals” as in one of his letters to Thomas Moore writing the following, “I have tried the rascals (i.e. the public) with my Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates.... Now, Tom, is thy time—‘Oh joyful day!’” (Byron to Thomas Moore, from Halnaby, January 10th 1815, pdf, 06, p.10).

That same public consisting of his advocates and his adversaries criticized him for bringing his already tensed family affairs before public attention through verses. Yet, this was Byron’s nature; during agitated state of mind and heart poetry was his only consolation and served a channel for him to reflect his inner sensations and feelings. As Goethe, once accounted in his *Conversations with Eckermann*<sup>[vi]</sup> (1822-32) “Byron expressed whatever he felt, and this brought him into ceaseless conflict with the world”. In fact, Byron’s inner emotions tended to go to the extremes, they were manifold and diverse, at several instances even contradicting, yet filled with passion. He had “a bosom constantly heaving forth from its depths such “lava floods”” as once said Moore of him. Byron regarded himself more as a man of action and despised the writers who were cut from the reality and life, while his own life proceeded in all the fullness of a life of a popular libertine thus inviting more and more public attention to his persona. It is true that once climbing at the Olympus of public attention owing to his captivating personality, his noble pedigree and disputable behavior Byron felt quite satisfied and played his part to maintain the current state of affairs. As Duchess of Devonshire famously said of him, “The subject of conversation, of curiosity, of enthusiasm... of the moment is not Spain or Portugal, warriors or patriots, but Lord Byron”.

Hence, Byron’s literary and private life was under close scrutiny on the part of the London society and the *Domestic Pieces* presented a firsthand account on the circumstance of the married life of a former fashionable dandy. To stir the sensations the publishers printed the pieces under the telling title “Poems by Lord Byron on his domestic circumstances” or “Distressing Circumstances in High Life ” as it was printed in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* on April 21, 1816. The moralistic society thus

condemned Byron for uncovering his family circumstances through either whining or vituperative poems. The criticism was especially heavy also owing to political reasons. The publications of the *Domestic Pieces* were preceded by the appearance of Byron's several "oppositional" pieces (*Ode from the French* in the *Morning Chronicle* on March 15 and *Star of the Legion of Honour* in the *Examiner* on April 7). The alert Tories took the chance to exploit this slip of morality of the Whig representative and directed the storm on political lines.

The society turned its back to Byron and ostracized the former desirable attendant of fashionable events from their circles. As Moore accounts "it required no small degree of courage, even among that class who are supposed to be the most tolerant of domestic irregularities, to invite him into their society". Countess of Jersey, a Whig hostess, found that courage in herself to give a party for Byron "on the eve of his departure" where he experienced the general cautious reaction towards himself after his notorious separation from Lady Byron and the publication of his infamous *Domestic Pieces*. On the next day, on April 25, 1816 Byron left England and never returned.

Although Byron sailed from England having at his back his broken family affairs, his bitter divorce and its public discussions, far from his homeland Byron's pen turned to be more prolific. After experiencing all these circumstances of life his Lordship stepped on as a more mature and established intellectual ready to compose a large bulk of his most prominent literary creations.

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## Endnotes

<sup>[i]</sup> Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* published in 1830. Retrieved from the electronic edition of the given work at <http://lordbyron.cath.lib.vt.edu/contents.php?doc=ThMoore.1830.Contents>. The present electronic edition was published as part of the series "Lord Byron and His Times", a digital archive of books, pamphlets, and periodical essays on Byron and controversies surrounding his persona.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Ernest Hartley Coleridge, grandson of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, together with Rowland E. Prothero published an enlarged edition of *The Works of Lord Byron* in 13 volumes starting from the year of 1898. In the present paper for the sake of convenience the mentioned work is referred to as *WLB*.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, the authoress of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, released her essay "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life" in the August 1869 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* after publication of the book by Lord Byron's last mistress, Countess Guiccioli where the latter disparaged Lady Byron. In 1870 Harriet Beecher Stowe published her own book "Lady Byron Vindicated" with an inscription "A history of the Byron controversy from its beginning in 1816 to the present time". Retrieved from the electronic edition of the given work at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14061/14061-h/14061-h.htm>

<sup>[iv]</sup> Byron's letters cited in the given paper are taken from Peter Cochran's "Byron's Correspondence and Journals" consisting of seventeen PDF files and representing a comprehensive database of letters written both by Byron and to Byron with a time span starting from 1791 till 1824 April. Retrieved from: <http://petercochran.wordpress.com/byron-2/byron/>

<sup>[v]</sup> "It has been said of Lord Byron, that "he was prouder of being a descendant of those Byrons of Normandy, who accompanied William the Conqueror into England, than of having been the author of Childe Harold and Manfred." (Moore 1830: 1).

<sup>[vi]</sup> The given extract was taken from *The Life and Works of Lord Byron*, a collection of resources dedicated to the second generation Romantic poet; section: *Contemporary and Critical Opinion of Lord Byron*; Retrieved from: <http://englishhistory.net/byron/goethe.html>