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Acts of the Imagination and Apocalyptic Role Playing in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Constructions
of Byron

Enchantment with Byron's poems, personality, and talents-inseparable from an ardent desire to reform him—characterize Harriet Beecher Stowe's constructions of Byron. Her family members helped cast the spell and ordained the cure. Stowe recalls, as an ill child of six or seven, wandering into her spinster Aunt Esther's room, taking a volume of Byron's *The Corsair*, and falling under the “glamourizing” [sic] spell of Byron.¹The work ‘astonished and electrified’ her. When she asked her Byron-reading Aunt Esther, what the words ‘One I never loved enough to hate’ meant, her Aunt replied: ‘Oh, child, it’s one of Byron’s strong expressions’ (Fields 38).

¹James Soderhoim speaks of the ‘glamour’ of Byron and of that magic moment ‘when a cult figure found his name and fame possessed by those who first enshrined him, when his works became public property, when his authorship and authority were challenged and his fame democratized. This moment can be fairly accurately dated. . . [in] *The Corsair* (1814)’ when ‘Medora asks . . . : ‘What sudden spell hath made this man so dear?’’ (7-8). Stowe's account of her ‘magic moment’ confirms Soderhoim's assertion. Commenting on another Byronic ‘magic moment,’ Stowe answers the question: ‘What were you doing when you heard Byron was dead?’

Stowe's father, Lyman Beecher, told her of Byron's separation from his wife and 'with a sorrowful countenance, as if announcing the death of some one very interesting to him,' he told the young Stowe, who was picking strawberries: 'My dear, Byron is dead-gone.' She returned to her berry picking no more that day (Fields 38).

Stowe recalls that 'Father often said, in after years, that he wished he could have seen Byron, and presented to his mind his views of religious truth. He thought if Byron 'could only have talked with [Nathaniel W.] Taylor and me, it might have got him out of his troubles'' (Fields 40). He admired Napoleon and burst into tears over another 'great lost soul,' Milton's Satan. The Sunday after Byron, died, Beecher preached on this text: 'The name of the just is as brightness, but the memory of the wicked shall rot.' Beecher predicted that 'notwithstanding the beauty of the language,' the impurities in Byron's poems 'would in a few years sink them in oblivion' (Fields 39). Forty-four years later, when his daughter published 'The True Story of Lady Byron's Life,' (July 1869)² she wrote in the apocalyptic diction of 'lost souls,' 'impurities,' 'iniquities,' and angels that characterized her father's speech, and she recorded, in words similar to those of her father, that Lady Byron had told her: 'Had he seen God as I see him, I am sure his heart would have relented' (LBV 248).

The Rev. Mr. Beecher never had the opportunity to inform and thus reform Byron, but his daughter, Harriet, made several efforts to do so in her imagination. C. H. Foster outlines Stowe's

² References to 'The True Story of Lady Byron's Life' may be found in Part III of *Lady Byron Vindicated* (abbreviated LBV throughout this paper), pp. 413-50.

literary efforts to reclaim Byron. At fourteen, Stowe responded to the wave of ‘Byromania’ by writing a verse drama, *Cleon*,’ concerning a Byronic hero, described as ‘wasted,’ who swims the Hellespont; however, ‘behind the facade of worldliness,’ Cleon becomes a Christian during the ‘degenerate days’ of Nero’s empire, an era not unlike that of Byron’s youth, according to Stowe, who wrote, much later, about ‘cravings for unnatural vice,’ observing that the ‘dregs of the old Greek and Roman civilization were foul with it’ (LBV 383). The work ends, implying that Cleon will be a Christian martyr even though Nero is willing to forgive Cleon his Christianity for the sake of his noble talents and character: ‘[Stowe] did not console some imitation Byron; in imagination, she saved Byron himself’ (Foster 222). Foster thinks, moreover, that Augustine St. Claire, Stowe’s spokesman in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851), is another version of Byron saved by her literary imagination and that Little Eva may be a figure for Ada (222).

In her constructions of Byron, Stowe relies heavily on texts— especially literary texts— those Byron wrote and those written about Byron. ‘The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life’ and *Lady Byron Vindicated* are wars of words featuring texts thrown at texts, literary allusions thrown at other allusions, letters thrown against letters, conversations hurled at conversations and even Byron’s non-extant ‘Autobiography,’ as she calls the famous burned Memoir, consciously countered by Stowe’s version of Lady Byron’s defense, which Stowe considers her unwritten autobiography. Thus, rather than forgeries, documents that have been burned vie with documents

that were never published (LBM 161).³ Against Byron ‘the Napoleon of words’⁴ Stowe defends Lady Byron’s ‘noble silence,’⁵ that, Stowe says, speaks louder than words of Lady Byron’s goodness. Stowe vows to speak the ‘word’ never spoken by Lady Byron. Taking some liberty with ‘word,’ she penned some 93,500 words contained on the four hundred and twenty nine pages that constitute *Lady Byron Vindicated*. Moreover, her war is waged, she says, particularly against the literary men who create and read texts that ennoble Byron and defame Lady Byron, texts that fail to honor the ‘privacy due womanhood’ and that disregard all chivalric honor in attacking a widow.

The defining event, nevertheless, in shaping Stowe’s views of Byron was not a text but her friendship with Lady Byron, which commenced in 1853 and culminated in 1856, when Lady Byron told her: ‘Mrs. Stowe, he was guilty of incest with his sister’ (LBV 235).⁶ Harriet

³ Stowe writes: ‘We have heard much mourning over the burned Autobiography of Lord Byron, and seen it treated of in a magazine as ‘the lost chapter in history.’ The lost chapter in history is Lady Byron’s Autobiography in her life and letters; and the suppression of them is the root of this whole mischief’ (LBV 161).

⁴ Lady Byron wrote Stowe: ‘. . . he is the absolute monarch of words, and uses them as Bonaparte did lives, for conquest, without regard to their intrinsic value’ (LBV 51).

⁵ That Lady Byron used silence as a weapon and refused to give information that might have exonerated Byron of charges made against him concerning his marital problems was Guiccioli’s accusation and that of others as well.

⁶ Mrs. Follet told Stowe this secret prior to Lady Byron’s relating it to her, but Stowe may have been unaware that the silent Lady Byron had told more than fifty other people, too. Lady Byron consulted Stowe on the matter of revealing the secret publicly because a new edition of Byron’s poems was being published which, she feared, would contain a story of the marriage adverse to herself. After consulting her sister, Stowe advised Lady Byron not to publish this

Beecher Stowe regarded the afternoon in which Lady Byron confided in her as the stuff of legends.

After she met Lady Byron in 1853, the change in Stowe's Byronic fictional figures is marked: 'In *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), Aaron Burr 'toys with the seduction of Mme de Frontignac because he feels artistic pleasure 'in the beautiful light and heat.' In *Oldtown Folks* [1869], Ellery Davenport goes even further, actually seducing Emily Rossiter and becoming the father of her child' (Foster 222). Clearly, Foster regards both Burr and Davenport as Byronic figures beyond redemption. By the time Stowe wrote her *Vindication*, she had, indeed, long since given up the effort to save Byron by acts of the imagination.

The facts of Stowe's writing and publication of *Lady Byron Vindicated* are well known. Stating that she waited patiently and without result for nine years after Lady Byron's death for her English friends to defend the noble woman from charges that she was responsible for the end of the Byronic marriage, for his subsequent miseries and even for his death, the task of defending her was left to the American, Harriet Beecher Stowe. When the favorable Blackwood's review of the Countess Guiccioli's *Recollections* accusing Lady Byron as the responsible figure for the dissolution of the marriage appeared in July of 1869, Stowe had, in all likelihood, already drafted 'The True Story of Lady Byron's Life,' which appeared in *Atlantic* for September, 1869. Her motives for writing her essay and for her subsequent book, *Lady Byron Vindicated*, undoubtedly were many. Forrest Wilson assumes that she was motivated in some degree in telling this 'unsavory story' because she wished to proclaim 'to the world the glamorous, stupendous fact

information. This story is well known, but see Foster 222.

that she, Harriet Beecher Stowe, had been the bosom friend of Byron's wife and widow, the sharer of her most intimate secrets' (Qtd. in Foster 223).

Joan D. Hedrick allows that Stowe might have wished to bolster sagging sales of her books but correctly places *Vindication* in the context of feminist struggles against abusive husbands and in the context of attacks that Stowe and other literary women were experiencing: 'Though she wrote about British, aristocratic subjects, Stowe's story of marital betrayal and incest reverberated powerfully within the political culture of the American woman's movement' (354). Especially interesting in this regard are Stowe's comments on the ways literary texts and stories are used to silence women and encourage their suffering. She speaks knowledgeably of Mill's term, the 'literature of the slavery of women' (LBV114). She also asked that Mill be sent a copy of her 'True Story.'

In *Lady Byron Vindicated* and in the Atlantic 'True Story,' many of Stowe's constructions of Byron are based on Lady Byron's constructions of Byron, which she gave Stowe. In Stowe's texts, then, we have double feminine constructions of Byron, and Stowe's use of her material is marked by agreement, disagreement (rare), and possible distortion, filtered through personal idiosyncrasies as well as the feminine ideology that permeated the culture of the day.

The affinities between Stowe and Lady Byron are apparent and important. Similar, in valuing intellectual and literary pursuits, and in puritanical religious tendencies, even in stature, it

is a commonplace in biographical studies of both Lady Byron and Stowe, that, following⁷ the ideology of the time, they were predisposed to think of the natural task and duty of a pure female as the Savior and Redeemer of a lost male soul of Byron's type.⁸ The Lady Byron/Stowe constructions of Lord Byron's may be described as an experience in 'layered redemption.'⁹ As we have seen, Stowe tried to save him in her imagination, while Lady Byron attempted to do so with the man himself. Stowe writes of Lady Byron as a young and gifted bride, noting she also brought a fortune with her: 'there is no wonder that she might feel for a while as if she could enter the lists with the Devil himself, and fight with a woman's weapons for the heart of her husband' (LBV 431).

By the time Harriet Beecher Stowe came to write *Lady Byron Vindicated*, her task was quite complicated. She dealt not only with Lady Byron's doomed efforts to function as a salvific Female Angel in the battle for Byron's vice-ridden soul— 'She longed to save; but he was gone past redemption'— (LBV 389)— but Stowe found herself a Woman Savior of another Angelic Female figure, rescuing the maligned reputation of the defamed Angel, Lady Byron, not only

⁷ It was important to Stowe that Lady Byron was small and frail as she herself was.

⁸ Somewhat ironically, however, Stowe writes of Lady Byron's union: 'Marriage has often been represented as the proper goal and terminus of a wild and dissipated career; and it has been supposed to be the appointed mission of good women to receive wandering prodigals, with all the rags and disgraces of their old life upon them, and put rings on their hands, and shoes on their feet, and introduce them, clothed and in their right minds to an honorable career in society' (LBV429). See also Gayle Kimball, *The Religious Ideas of Harriet Beecher Stowe: Her Gospel of Womanhood* (New York and Toronto: the Edwin Mellen Press, 1982) 70-77.

⁹ See Soderholm's remarks on 'layered procurement' (112).

from the Satanic spin-master.¹⁰ Byron, who continued to reach out and vilify her from the grave, but from the spiritualizing of Byron-as-Angel, by the fallen, Italian woman of easy virtue, the Countess Guiccioli: Stowe published her work in reaction both to Guiccioli's 1868 text defending Lord Byron and to the Blackwood's article reviewing Guiccioli's book; both texts offended her mightily. Hendrick characterizes Guiccioli's defense as a 'male version' of the Byronic marriage (354), and Stowe sums up Guiccioli's comments on Byron: 'He has been in the world as an angel unaware since his cradle' (LBV 176).

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell anticipates the dazzling display of name calling and role swapping encountered in the Guiccioli/Stowe constructions of the apocalyptic Byronic drama of sin and scandal: 'For this history has been adopted by both parties. Moreover, Byron himself left for both Guiccioli and Stowe a data bank of poetry and prose filled with the imagery and diction of heaven and hell with the requisite attending spirits that one finds in Stowe's and in other feminine constructions of him. Stowe agrees with Lady Byron concerning the fact that Byron's specific theological problem was 'the Calvinistic theology, as heard in Scotland' (LBV 448). His tragedy was that he could not find the loving merciful God that both Lady Byron and Stowe agreed they had found. Lady Byron had once fashioned herself as the Woman as Saving Angel of the Demonic Byron, but the seventy year old Guiccioli claimed the Saving Woman Angel role for herself after both Lord and Lady Byron were dead, assigning the demonic role to

¹⁰ Stowe's version of Byron as an early spin master, manipulating news, facts, texts, and letters, even from the grave, is a fascinating story for another paper.

Lady Byron in her *Recollections of Lord Byron* (translated 1870). And, as Soderholm says, ‘The Byron she [Guiccioli] conjured up— now a Catholic, a sentimentalist, and a speaker of French— became a most unlikely angel in the house’ (130).

In Guiccioli’s *Recollections*, ‘Byron rose like a resurrected man, canonized by her love’ (Soderholm 121). Stowe, who said that Byron ‘was foul to the bone,’ found her constructions of Byron inextricably bound up in those of Lady Byron. She was thus left to assert a heavenly role for Lady Byron: ‘There was so much Christ in her that to have seen her seemed to be to have drawn near to heaven’ (LBV 446). Elsewhere, Stowe bestows on her the highest role in her ideological list of roles available to women, that of a loving Mother to the insane Byron-child (LBV 449). She writes in defense of Lady Byron: ‘As a lamb before her shearers is dumb, so she opened not her mouth’ (49). In one Biblical quotation she associates Lady Byron with Christ and reminds the reader of the nobility of Lady Byron’s silence. Stowe also addresses Lady Byron as ‘you whose whole life has been a crucifixion’ (LBV 399). The fact that, according to Stowe, Byron would not make up his mind which of the apocalyptic roles to fill is further cited as a cause of his and Lady Byron’s marital difficulties: ‘The most dreadful men to live with are those who thus alternate between angel and devil’(LBV433).

Stowe’s own roles in the drama are many. She is the avenging Angel and Savior of Lady Byron, a detective finding clues, a legal arbiter of the case between Lord and Lady Byron, the judge and disposer of the case of Lord Byron, and a psychiatrist/physician diagnosing Byron’s ‘madness.’ It should be pointed out, however, that, in spite of remarks quoted previously in this

paper, Stowe declares neither she nor Lady Byron ever subscribed to any ideas that anyone, even Lord Byron, was absolutely beyond redemption and God's saving grace. Stowe, in fact, is willing to consider the Romish doctrine of Purgatory as the place inhabited by Byron after death, so unwilling is she to accept that he is damned (LBV 401), nor did she wish to imply that Lady Byron thought that he was. She quotes Lady Byron as saying: 'I do not believe that any child of the heavenly Father is ever left to eternal sin' (LBV 251). In fact, Stowe quotes her further as saying her husband, in afterlife, has been ennobled, and the 'angel in him... made perfect according to its divine ideal' (LBV 445). Ironically, Lady Byron (according to Stowe) and the Countess Guiccioli agree about Byron's heavenly destiny.

Stowe herself had problems with the doctrine of natural depravity and Byron's entrapment in Calvinistic doctrines saddened her. She had reason to believe in both spiritual and physiological renewal in her own life: 'Harriet's religious conversion of 1843 was paralleled in 1846 by a secular conversion to the water cure' (Hedrick 173). One of Stowe's most interesting contributions to the Byronic constructions is her physiological analysis of the poet. Like Guiccioli, she comments on his abstemiousness, and on his dislike of eating at certain times, but finds a pattern of extremism rather than spirituality in this paradigm: 'He was like a fine musical instrument, whose strings were every day alternating between extreme tension and perfect laxity. (LBV 377). The periods of abstemiousness only led, however, to periods of intense debauchery that were fatal for a person of his physical composition. Stowe reveals her analysis of Byron's basic physiological and moral 'organization' as feminine:

Byron's physical organization was originally as fine and as sensitive as that of the most delicate woman. He possessed the faculty of moral ideality in a high degree; and he had not, in the earlier part of his life an attraction towards mere brutal vice. His physical sensitiveness was so remarkable, that he says of himself, 'A dose of salts has the effect of a temporary inebriation, like light champagne upon me.' (L & M 375)

His power of 'moral ideality' is clearly the attractive feminine quality in Byron that she isolates, for this was absolutely consistent with her own belief and that of many of her contemporaries that woman was constituted the finer, the more morally pure 'organization.' Stowe analyzes Byron according to the dictums of Dr. Forbes Winslow on 'Obscure Diseases of the Brain and Nerves,' which, she says, contains an exact description of Byron's condition and is 'the only clew that can unravel the sad tragedy of Byron's life (LBV 387). The physiological change that took place in the delicately, indeed femininely¹¹ constructed brain of Lord Byron, according to Winslow's dictums as applied to Byron by Stowe in her psychiatrist/physician role, sneaked up on him as an invasive evil: 'The change may have progressed insidiously and stealthily, having slowly and almost imperceptibly induced important molecular modifications in the delicate vesicular neurine of the brain, ultimately resulting in some aberration of the ideas, alteration of the affections, or perversion of the propensities or instincts' (387). Persons, like Byron, subject to this rare form of insanity, she says, again quoting Dr. Winslow:

¹¹ Interestingly enough, Stowe writes: 'Lady Byron, though slight and almost infantine in her bodily presence, had the soul, not only of an angelic woman, but of a strong, reasoning man' (LBV 434).

are martyrs to ungovernable paroxysms of passion, are inflamed to a state of demonical fury by the most insignificant of causes, and occasionally lose all sense of delicacy of feeling, sentiment, refinement of manners, and conversation. Such manifestations of undetected mental disorder may be associated with intellectual and moral qualities of the highest order (Qtd. in Stowe 388).

Stowe is convinced that ‘alcoholic stimulants and licentious excesses’ were responsible for the changes in Byron’s brain that inevitably led him to commit an act of criminal immorality. Byron ‘took the very course which, by every physiological law, would have led to unnatural results.’ That is, he committed incest, perhaps even adulterous incest. These words express Stowe’s most memorable and damning construction of Byron. With no hope of either a spiritual or physical water cure for the now dead poet, she also left us with a curiously contemporary, late twentieth century, version of Byron: ‘Harriet postulated not a moral monster but a sick man’ (Foster 225).

In her analysis of Byron’s flawed character, she describes him as an ‘awful wreck and ruin’ (LM 393). She speaks of ‘the noble fragments . . . in the shattered temple of his mind’ (LBV 398), mirroring the Miltonic passages that described Satan, which so moved her father, and Byron’s ruined littered landscapes of *Childe Harold IV*. Ultimately, however, she places the blame for her revelation of his sins on the perpetrator: ‘It is, then, Lord Byron himself, who, by his network of wiles, his ceaseless persecutions of his wife, his efforts to extend his partisanship beyond the grave, has brought on this tumultuous exposure. He, and he alone, is the cause of this revelation’ (408).

Stowe's reading public did not, however, agree with her, but blamed Stowe for violating the boundaries established for true womanhood by stooping to scandal. A popular cartoon of the day showed Stowe 'clambering up a statue of Lord Byron; he is striking a noble pose while she is hunched in a suggestive posture, leaving dirty footprints as she pulls herself up' (Hendrick 369). She had sinned against 'the purity of womanhood' and sullied the Victorian ideal. Seeking to vindicate Lady Byron's ways to Byron, in the mind of the public, Stowe herself became the Fallen Angel.

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