

Byron, The Suffragettes and Romancing the Sublime

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Article abstract

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BYRON, THE SUFFRAGETTES AND ROMANCING THE SUBLIME¹

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Résumé

« Fou, voyou, une dangereuse connaissance² » : voilà ce qu'aurait pu dire une femme en parlant du Lord Byron comme entité sexuelle. Mais qu'aurait-elle dit de lui dans son rôle de poète? Était-il aussi dangereux? M'inspirant de recherches récentes sur le mouvement des suffragettes en Grande-Bretagne, sur le militantisme des suffragettes et l'importance des mots dans leur cause, je ferai valoir dans cet article que les féministes étaient radicalement attirées à Byron. Les suffragettes avaient adopté le cri de guerre « De la parole aux actes », mais celui-ci s'avérait être une lame à double tranchant. La parole, et pas seulement les actes, était d'une importance vitale à Emmeline Pankhurst et ses disciples, et les paroles de Byron figuraient parmi celles qu'elles préféraient. Plus d'une fois, le Lord Byron se trouvait à la scène d'un crime commis par les suffragettes. Celles-ci avaient inscrit « Ceux qui veulent être libres doivent s'affranchir de leurs propres mains³ » (*Childe Harold* 2. 76) sur des bouts de papier qu'elles avaient fixés avec de la corde aux pierres destinées aux fenêtres du palais de Westminster – pierres qui furent lancées, avec un flair byronnien, par des mains vêtues de gants et parées de plumes. Lord Byron, donc, l'irrépressible coureur de jupons de l'ère romantique, serait l'instigateur de la première vague du mouvement féministe.

A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together
Ecclesiastes 3:5

Defining the sublime can be as perplexing as elucidating the term orgasm to a virgin and is potentially as pleasurable if not painful — especially when it comes to Lord Byron's poetry and the female response to it, though not all feminists might agree on the terms of the ravishment. The question which occurs now is, can a woman be a feminist and still love the likes of Byron? A short answer might be that it depends on the feminist. A shorter one, perhaps more provocative, is a resounding Mollyfied (as in Joyce's *Ulysses*) "Yes" (933). For while it may be true that Byron wooed many women beneath the coverlets, owing to the power of the seductive sublime, perhaps more women have ravished him between the lines of his poetry. In what follows, I will discuss Lord Byron, both as ravisher and ravishee — as viewed by several of his critics, his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Suffragette's response to it, then mine. My aim is to demonstrate that an encounter with the sublime, not unlike a sexual experience, is a result of ravishing, or that which transpires in the space between the object and the imagination, between the beholder and the beheld.

Since Lady Caroline Lamb's famous phrase, women have had much to say about the "mad — bad — and dangerous to know" Byron, including those who would relegate certain Byronic phrases to the analects of phallocentric discourse. And, depending on the woman, some cast Byron into a pit of literary mandrakes and stone him for it; yet, others have loved and still love him in spite of it. For example, in the preface to her novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson greatly admires Byron and "the softest, purest and whitest" garments that he wears, as she likes to think of it, "next to his heroic skin" (xi). Then, at the other extreme, a feminist could go so far as to parody one of Byron's more bawdy puns — such as the one in his famous letter to Kinnaird (BLJ 8: 57) and tauntingly retort, the canticles are so much stronger than the testicles these days. Sonia Hofkosh appears to think so.

In "The Writer's Ravishment" she points a blaming finger (though some might suggest with envy) at Byron's definition of poetry and redefines Byron's erupting "lava of the imagination" as an "ejaculatory

imperative” (93). Her displeasure with Byron does not stem from his knickers nor his poetry, but a journal entry where he mentions Richardson’s *Pamela* being torn and “wrapt round the bacon” by a grocer in his grocery store (95). According to Hofkosh’s view, women have been essentially raped, not only as objects in Romantic literature, but also as a commodity in what should be a fair if not friendly literary market place (96). She concludes that women are construed as the other factor and ravished by the androcentric power of Romantic Discourse. Except for the fact that she makes but one actual reference to Byron’s poetry, Hofkosh creates a convincing crime scene through references to the letters and journals, rendering poor Byron virtually brief-less in this case against him.

Nor does it seem that Byron’s ability to ravish is a purely feminist based phenomena. Although Malcolm Kelsall may seek to offer women other options, in “Byron and the Women of the Harem,” he admits readily that Byron fits the “feminist representation of the male as phallogentric patriarch” and that the “very title of his masterpiece *Don Juan*, reaffirms the archetype” (165). In response to these accusations, Byron, who can give as good as he might get, would retort: “I would like to know *who* has been carried off — except poor dear *me* — I have been ravished more than anybody since the Trojan war — but as to the arrests and it’s [sic] causes — one is true as the other — and I can account for the invention of neither (BLJ 6: 237).⁴

More to our point, as Blackstone notes, “it is always in his flippancies that Byron is most serious” (79). Still, it is Byron’s penchant to amuse that makes it difficult to know what to believe. For instance, Marchand recalls a Byron who insists that he hates children enough to take up sides with Herod (*Byron* 290). Yet, Byron, soon after becoming the father to Ada, manifests the love that accompanies his atypical parenthood, by exclaiming in his poetry, “My daughter! with thy name this song begun” (CHP 3. 115). Often, Byron’s rhetorical obliquity makes it seem as if two of him are present.

In “Byronic Attitudes,” Marchand recommends that Byron’s letters and poetry “must be read together and sifted” (239). Germaine Greer shares such an attitude. Her consideration of Byron comes from a thoughtful reading of his poetry — not just quoting bits and pieces of his journal, or parts of his candid conversations with others. She states in *The*

Change that Byron “is unusual among poets in that he was genuinely interested in women as people and aware of the fundamental gravity of the women question” (23). Another feminist might be quick to point out that Byron poked fun at Felicia Hemans by dubbing her a He-man and that knitting “blue stockings instead of wearing them would be better” (qtd. in Damrosch, 706). Although inexcusable, it is important to remember that they shared the same publisher and Byron was want to defend himself against the competition. This indeed was a compliment to the not-to-be-daunted and exceptionally learned Felicia. Byron had sincere compassion for women. Against the commonplace masculine consideration of women (or perhaps lack of it), Greer sees a Byron who stands above the others. Lines from *Don Juan* support her argument.

But as to women, who can penetrate
The real sufferings of their she condition?
Man’s very sympathy with their estate
Has much of selfishness and more suspicion.
(DJ 14. 24).

Where Byron dares to refer to the then un-talked about “climacteric of a woman” (Greer, 23), he demonstrates empathy towards women — at a time before the medical profession or even women themselves were able to define or understand their plight. In fact, in his poetry, Byron renders visible the older woman, someone neglected by male and even most modern female writers.

Thus, in considering the “real sufferings of their she condition,” man’s “selfishness and more suspicion,” perhaps no case is more poignant than the suffering of Emmeline Pankhurst and the Suffragettes of Britain. However, when Byron said that he had been ravished more than anybody since the Trojan War, it is unlikely that he would have imagined being ravished by a throng of feminists, in the form of the Suffragettes of Britain — nor the incredible effect that ravishing was to have.

By their own admission, the oft-criticized Romantic poets seem to have written with the intent to ravish, but ravish the language lovingly, as it were, not a person. For example, consider Keats, “I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover” (qtd. in Levinson 189); or Blake, who regards the

body as the outward form of the soul and who seeks a liberation of the poetic genius, “This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment” (154); or lastly, Byron who enthuses, “Why, just now, / In taking up this paltry sheet of paper, / My bosom underwent a glorious glow, / And my internal Spirit cut a caper” (DJ 10. 3).

There is evidence as well, however, that Victorian women readers ravished the poets’ words in return, unabashedly, though they lived in an era which not only demanded moral virtue, but also limited a woman’s education to better please her husband, not to instigate a ruckus by taking up a cause. Yet that is exactly what some women did, and in the process, enticed others to do the same.

According to Kate Flint in *The Woman Reader*, one Victorian suffragette records her experience of reading, as “excitement in physical, almost sexual terms.” As Flint records, “For the first time in my life . . . I tasted that wonderful experience, when the printed words leave the page and become an infusion in the blood, making the heart beat faster, and transporting the imagination to some other sphere of existence” (236).

Akin to this suffragette’s intensely physical, almost orgasmic response to what, we assume, is a moment of the poetical sublime, is a comment by Blanchot,

An appeal the reader hears only as he responds to it, that deflects the reader from his habitual relations and turns him towards the space near which reading bides and becomes an approach, a delighted reception that raises the work to being and turns the reception into a ravishment, the ravishment in which the work is articulated. (qtd. in Hofkosh, 110)

While some may contend that it is the reader and not the poet who is being ravished in both cases cited here, a response described with this level of intensity implies a reciprocal experience. The mutual enjoyment suggests a coming together of separate spheres: the poet from his realm, and the reader, unknown to him, from out of hers. A romancing of the

language ensues. Thus, the poet ravishes the language and the reader ravishes a ravished language.

When a poet, such as Byron, chose his words, it was not without taking a chance as to how they would be received. Despite attention paid to critical reviews, once published the poet does not have any control over what is done to his words or what acts may be inspired because of them. Whatever may or may not have been intended by a particular word or phrase, it is left entirely to the reader to receive and to ravish the words within the private realm of the imagination to her, or the poet's, heart's content. A poet may create the possibility, but the reader gives a word or phrase, a certain breath of life based upon her depth of intelligence and breadth of imagination. Of great depth and breadth were the intelligence and imagination of Emmeline Pankhurst.

As suffragette historian June Purvis brings to light, reading tales of a romantic and idealistic nature was Emmeline's favorite childhood pastime (9). One obvious link to the Romantic poets and her knowledge of their poetry in general is that Emmeline's first born, a daughter, was named Christabel, after Coleridge's poem, "the lovely lady Christabel whom her father loves so well," as Christabel records in her autobiography entitled, *Unshackled* (Pankhurst 24). However, as the young wife and mother Emmeline matured, her life seems to have been influenced by Byron, freedom fighter par excellence, particularly in reference to *Childe Harold*.

As explained by Fulford, prompted by her concern for the poor working conditions for women in the factories of Manchester, Emmeline founded The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903 (305). Committed to equality, her mandate was to win the vote for women. By 1906, this group developed more militant tactics. After an eleven-year struggle, a bill was passed in the House of Commons in December of 1917, which gave the vote to women — at the ripe age of thirty. Ten years later, in 1928, the age was reduced to 21 and in the "easy going slang of the 20s became dubbed the flapper vote."

The term suffragette was first coined by the Daily Mail on 10 June, 1906 to distinguish the more militant antics of the WSPU from the more passive and, therefore, more socially acceptable suffragists. What ensued was one of the greatest battles of the sexes since *Lysistrata* — without the humour. The Suffragettes "unsex'ed themselves" as the press called it

and forged ahead in the battle for the vote for women (Fulford 246). Or, as H. W. Nevinson recalls, the Suffragettes were branded unsexed viragoes (306). Emmeline implored women to take charge of the situation themselves, saying, “We don’t want to use any weapons that are unnecessarily strong. If the argument is of the stone, the time honoured official political argument, is sufficient, then we will never use any stronger argument. And that is the weapon and the argument we are going to use next time” (qtd. in Fulford 246). A legion of well-dressed middle-class women put aside their wifely duties and began target practice immediately. Some, like the argumentative Emmeline, could not hit the broad side of a barn. Thankfully, sticks and stones were not to be their most powerful weapon.

“Deeds not words,” a phrase inverted from Shelley’s *The Mask of Anarchy* was adopted as the suffragette war cry, as suggested by the title of Hilda Kean’s study, *Deeds Not Words*. Yet, the provocative phrase served as a two-edged sword. For words, and not only deeds, were of vital importance to Emmeline Pankhurst and her followers. And Byron’s words, “Who would be free themselves must strike the blow” (CHP 2. 76) as shall be shown, were among their favourites. Emmeline’s daughter, Christabel, tells of copies of the petition and bits of poetry wrapped “round stones which they flung through the windows of the home office and other Government buildings” (Pankhurst 132) stones which Byron may have very well described as those being “Foil’d by a woman’s hand, before a batter’d wall” (CHP 1. 56). The suffragettes armed themselves with rocks and poetry and took to smashing windows, doing so with an unmistakable Byronic flair for style — in delicately gloved hands and feathered finery. This act was not to be the only one strangely reminiscent of Byron.

The fierceness of an unsexed virago was something Byron understood. Desirous to invoke sympathy for one such unsung warrior woman, are words worthy of reflection here.

Is it for this Spanish maid, arous'd,
Hangs on the willow with her unstrung guitar,
And, all unsex'd, the Anlace hath epous'd,
Sung the loud song, and dar'd the deed of war?
And she, whom once the semblance of a scar
Appall'd, an owl's 'larum chill'd with dread,
Now views the column-scattering bay'net jar,
The falchion flash, o'er the yet warm dead
Stalks with Minerva's step where Mars might quake to tread.
(CHP 1. 54)

Byron seems to ask of the reader, who can blame her? Such a question resonates in the case of Emmeline and the Suffragettes in their fight to give silenced women a voice, while men and even women jeered at their valiant efforts. In the attempt to win enfranchisement, not only were these valiant women's petitions denied, their attempts resulted in imprisonment where they suffered all sorts of obscenities and in some cases, death. Their only crime was to win the vote for women. But as Byron wrote in defence of the Spanish maid, the same may be said of Emmeline, "Ye who shall marvel when you hear her tale, / Oh! had you known her in her softer hour" (55). Byron had the ability put himself in the situation of a woman, "My brain is feminine" (DJ 1. 195). And it is in his lyric "To Thyrza" where, according to Marchand, it was in "using a woman's name, he was able to give full release to his sorrow for the loss of Edleston" (*Byron* 296), the dear friend for whom the attraction was complex. Perhaps the reason that Byron's words resonated so deeply with these "unsexed" women was that Byron questioned so profoundly his own sex.

As Lisa Tickner describes it, on 13 June 1908, ten to fifteen thousand elegantly dressed women from England, France, Russia, South Africa, Hungary, Australia and America, descended upon London wearing red and white sashes, and carrying beautiful hand-painted banners. Tickner describes one such banner, that of the NUWT (National Union of Women Teachers) as follows: "Rectangle. Blue green with cream orange. Rocco ornamentation in upper corners. Rising Sun framed by circular riband with National Union of Women Teachers. Crossed quills below entwined with another scrolling riband" (275). Upon this banner was written the

phrase adapted from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto 2, "Who would be free herself must strike the blow." Seemingly, Byron's words were appropriated for their own. Emmeline was clearly not the only one desirous to ravish his words. The phrase "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow" is remarkable in the use of the pronoun who. At the beginning of a sentence, the pronoun signals a question, as it does in the context of Byron's poem and Greek liberation. However, in the Suffragette's case, the questioner already has the answer in mind. Here the free, the revelatory who, signifies those who do not wait for someone else to free them. They are those who strike the blow themselves, male or female; and, As Byron knows, "(For sometimes we must box without the muffle)" (DJ 2. 92). The Suffragettes, accused of unsexing themselves, put themselves in harm's way for the right of womankind, to win enfranchisement. When considering some feminists and their aversion to Byron, it is even more ironic that Byron, of all men, helped women and did it without his consent. Yes, Virginia (and Sonia), to ravish is to rape and the suffragettes ravished Byron — to their own end and won the vote for women.

Can there be such a thing as the romancing of Byron's language, incorporeal yet palpable? For some, the answer is, yes. Or, as John Wilson wrote in his review of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

the words seem to pass by others like air, and to find their way to the hearts for whom they were intended, — kindred and sympathizing spirits, who discern and own that secret language, of which privacy is not violated, though spoken in hearing of the uninitiated, — because it is not understood. There is an unobserved beauty that smiles on us alone; and the more beautiful to us, because we feel as if we have been chosen out from a room full of lovers. (qtd. in Damrosch, 567)

Such, perhaps, was the experience of Emmeline and the Suffragettes of Britain, who laid the way for future feminists. I would never have imagined myself, as a feminist, to have been smitten by a poet — and a

dead one at that. Byron tried to tell the truth — the best that any woman can expect from a man, or a man from a woman. I have become a somewhat jealous lover of his poetry and am unaccustomed to sharing him in public. Encouragingly, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous invites women to express themselves through their bodies; and, somewhat reminiscent of Blake's idea of visionary perception, she states that, "Women's imaginary is inexhaustible . . . their streams of phantasms is incredible" (246).

Since the days of my reservations concerning Byron, I have been to places I never dreamed of going, temporally as well as metaphysically; places such as England, where I am pursuing an MA in Women Studies, and where, for example, Byron's Venetian "Bridge of Sighs" and its Oxonian version exist side-by-side within my own imagination. I have visited, as well, the Chateau de Chillon in Switzerland (minus the thunderstorms of 1816). Through Byron's crevice in the wall, I have sensed the chill of a chain which favours the flesh of neither gender. Not unlike Byron, I can admit that "I, too overflow: my desires have invented knew desires; my body knows of unheard of songs" (Cixous 264).

A sigh is an expression of yearning or longing, but can also mean exasperation. A sigh signifies pleasure or disappointment. Sighs can hold a treasure full of past moments, sometimes unrelinquished and all the dearer held. A sigh is all these things and more to Byron. Within the first thirteen stanzas of the first canto, Childe Harold sighs six times; once "o'er Delphi;" then sighs "to many though he loved but one;" he crossed the brine "without a sigh;" he questions his mother's sigh; mistrusts the "seeming sighs" of women; and finally, wonders why he should "groan, / When none will sigh for him." These are not the sighs of an unsympathetic man, but the insights of a thoughtful poet, profoundly in love with language.

In conclusion, perhaps the answer to the Byron and the woman question depends not so much on the feminist, but on which words of Byron she chooses to ravish at a particular moment. In the case for and against both Byron ravishers and ravishees — male and female, we have Lady Blessington:

We should judge others not by self, for that is deceptive, but by their general conduct and character. We rarely do this, because that with *le besoin d'aimer*, which all ardent minds have, we bestow are affections on the first person that chance throws in our path, and endow them with every good and noble quality, which qualities are unknown to them, and existed only in our imaginations. We discover too late, our own want of discrimination; but instead of blaming ourselves, we throw the whole censure on those whom we have overrated, and declare war on the whole species because we have chosen ill, and 'loved not wisely, but too well . . .'. (qtd. in Lovell 166)

Can a woman be a feminist and still love Byron? In the voice of Molly Bloom, a feminist in her own right, who amid the crumbs of another man's sandwich in the marriage bed, sighs "yes, I said yes I will Yes."

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¹ This work is indebted to the teaching of Paul M. Curtis, professor of English at l'Université de Moncton and to Hilda Kean, tutor of the MA Women's Studies at Ruskin College, in Oxford.

² La traduction de Sonya Malaborza.

³ Traduction de B. Laroche (Paris : V. Lecou, 1847).

⁴ Hofkosh cites this letter in the fourth and final section of her essay (109).