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Britannia: The Other Woman in Byron's Life

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<1>Byron's attitude towards the opposite sex throughout his life is often bound up with feelings of hostility, suspicion, betrayal and being threatened, tempered by feelings of affection that he may have felt on occasion for individual women, such as Augusta Leigh or Theresa Guiccioli, but very rarely for the gender in general. His relationship with his mother was tempestuous – he recorded his sentiments regarding his mother in his “Epitaph on Mrs. [Byron]” (1806/1807):

Prone to take Fire, yet not of melting Stuff,
Here lies what once was woman – that's enough.
Such were her vocal powers, her temper such,
That all who knew them both exclaimed ‘too much!’
(CPWI.11)

He claimed in later life to have been abused by his nurse May Gray, but the seeds for his early distrust of women may have been sown by the perceived betrayal by his childhood object of infatuation, Mary Chaworth: “She was the beau idéal of all that my youthful fancy could paint of beautiful; and I have taken all my fables about the celestial nature of women from the perfection my imagination created in her – I say created, for I found her, like the rest of the sex, any thing but angelic” (Medwin 61). Mary Chaworth may have flirted with the young Byron but never seriously considered him as an object of romantic interest, and her “betrayal” consisted of her marrying her beau, John Musters, in 1805. A large proportion of the poetry written during Byron's adolescence consists of poems addressed to women, as testaments to his adoration; or his views on the relationship between the sexes, which could be either idealised or cynical. This fragment dedicated to Mary Chaworth, written after her wedding, occasions the first event of Byron identifying a geographic site with an occasion of emotional upheaval:

Hills of Annesley, bleak and barren,
Where my thoughtless childhood stray'd,
How the northern tempests, warring,
Howl above thy tufted shade!

Now no more, the hours beguiling,
Former favourite haunts I see;
Now no more my Mary smiling
Makes ye seem a Heaven to me.
(CPWI.3)

Throughout his poetic career Byron often uses this conflation stylistically, where (geographic) location often becomes the signifier of incidents of inner turmoil caused by the treachery of women, a metaphorical marker to express intensity and depth of feeling. In this article I will demonstrate how Byron's tendency to conflate woman and geographic location holds significant implications for the way he felt and wrote about England, a nation feminised and allegorised enduringly as Britannia.

<2>Anthropomorphication of the nation is a concept that has existed almost as long as the concept of the nation itself. This idea of personification may have originated with the symbol of Pallas Athene, the patron of Athens. She won a contest in which she was pitted against Poseidon, by offering the citizens of Athens the olive tree, which was deemed more useful than the sea-god's gift of salt water. Her victory was decided by a vote that was divided along gender lines which incurred the wrath of Poseidon. He flooded the city and would only withdraw his curse if women were made exempt from civic life, thus giving rise to the Athenian patriarchal polity. The gendered duality of the nascent state is thus signified by patriarchal state governed from the

metro-polis (“mother-city”). The historic denial of this binary relationship takes root in the best known version of the legend of the birth of Athene springing fully formed from the forehead of Zeus. As Moira Gatens points out in her book *Imaginary Bodies*, the myth that Zeus swallowed his pregnant wife Metis whole, for fear that she may give birth to children more powerful than himself has often been neglected, giving the lie that Athene is “the product of man’s reason” (22). Indeed, the concept of autochthony, the belief that the Athenians sprung from the earth without female agency, echoes this lack, embodying the wish of “artificial man, the body politic” mirroring the psychoanalytically postulated “infantile wish for independence from the maternal body” (Gatens 22).

<3>This eliding of the gendered representation of the nation still exists in contemporary academic accounts of the nation, as Ida Blom writes:

gender has been a neglected category of analysis in the flowering field of historical research on nation building, the nation state and nationalisms, but it may also be said that, historiographically, the understanding of history as primarily *the history of nations*, of governments, of kings and statesmen, in short, of the public sphere, has been an obstacle to historical research on gender, on the private sphere and civil society. There seems to have been, from the beginning, a built-in antithesis between the two fields of history, histories of nation, and histories of gender. (3)

This is surprising, given that gendered personifications of the nation are ubiquitous forcing an examination of the overlapping histories of nation and gender. The representation of Britannia evolved from a coerced Amazon at the mercy of the Roman emperor Claudius in the first century, signifying Britain’s status as a conquered nation, into a triumphant figure in the sixteenth century, bearing the hallmarks associated with Pallas Athene such as the shield and the breastplate as well as the qualities embodied by the goddess. such as “the champion of heroes, protector of cities, and keeper of the nation’s conscience . . . action and contemplation, strength and compassion” (Hewitt). Though her female identity was perpetuated by Elizabeth I’s long rule, it was at odds with the reality of the lack of influence women possessed in England both socially and politically in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, the increase in women’s literacy and opportunities for education paved the way for what Marlon B. Ross has referred to as “one of the most important literary phenomenon in British literary history” (qtd. in Chaplin, 1228): an explosion of a literature both produced and consumed by women.

<4>Though women’s writing at this time was often about such sentimental subjects as domestic life and romance, the “novel of sensibility” carried explicit moral messages that shaped the agenda of an increasingly imperialist nation. As Jacqueline Pearson writes:

[T]he rise of the domestic woman in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a major event in political history, and the entrenchment of domestic ideology shaped the feminine role and female subject in fundamental ways, with women becoming the symbols and the guarantors of a secure, middle-class virtue. (2)

Contemporary depictions of Britannia that appeared significantly as an emblem on coins and banknotes, showed her as the true embodiment of English identity as a self-aggrandising commercial power eager to extend her reign. Suvir Kaul in his *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire* proposes that the appearance of ‘Rule, Britannia’ at the end of James Thomson’s *Alfred: A Masque*, “enacts fully the desire of British poets for a cultural power that would be more than literary—that would declaim to a rapt audience the coming of a global power of a puissant Britain, divinely ordained inheritor of the imperial and civilizational traditions of classical Europe” (1). Kaul hypothesises that the word Rule functions “as more than an unintentional pun in the poem, albeit one that is made resonant by what we know of the emphasis on measuring, chart making, and calculation in the making of the British naval supremacy in the eighteenth century” (6).

<5>This notion of the feminised nation threatened the existing “discourse of civic humanism” that “was the most authoritative fantasy of masculinity in early eighteenth century Britain” (Barrell 103). As Stephen H. Gregg has demonstrated, eighteenth century conceptions of a feminized nation considered it “debauched, diseased” susceptible to “Luxury and Debauchery” which leads to “Cowardize” (17) all of which endangered the nation and threatened national pride: “They lose their Reputation abroad, and have no Strength at home; and are an easie Prey to Foreign Enemies” (qtd. in Gregg 18).

<6>Byron, as an aristocrat attending the most prominent educational institutions of his time, naturally interiorised the rhetoric of masculine virtue and homosociability that these institutions believed was their responsibility to impart. Much of his early poetry was dedicated to celebrating the friendships he had forged at Harrow, often dwelling upon the potential for future glory his contemporaries possessed. "Childish Recollections", Byron's paean to Harrow published in *Hours of Idleness*, often refers to his schoolmates in terms of a fraternity: "All, all, that brothers should be, but the name" (l. 264). Byron no doubt envisioned both himself and his peers as future leaders of the nation, conceiving of it, as Benedict Anderson has observed as "a deep horizontal comradeship" (16).

<7>However, the sentimental tone of this poem as well as the preponderance of Byron's early poetry addressed to a female audience betrays the influence that female writing and audience had on Byron's work. Critics such as Jerome McGann, Peter Cochran and Susan Wolfson have tracked down Byron's debts to such authors such as Charlotte Dacre and Felicia Hemans, debts that Byron was at pains to conceal. According to McGann, Byron was most impressed by Dacre's sentimental poetry, an opinion he conspicuously reneged upon in his *English Bards and Scots Reviewers* (54). However, Peter Cochran's assessment that Byron was not "an automatic despiser of women who wrote" (1) is convincing; his antagonism seemed to be directed much more at his female readership than at fellow writers.

<8>Byron persistently describes himself as a victim of female consumption, both physical and textual: "Your Blackwood accuses me of treating women harshly – it may be so – but I have been their martyr. – My whole life has been sacrificed to them & by them" (*BLJ* 6.257) he wrote in a letter to John Murray in 1819. In her examination of sexual politics and the romantic author, Sonia Hofkosh suggests that Byron's version of Hazlitt's statement: "Literature, like nobility, runs in the blood" "implicitly biologizes the process of literary production, making the writing body and the gendered politics of its individuation particularly palpable in the romance of authorship"

(36). Hofkosh observes that "the self becomes the author when the work that is his own belongs to others, when it is published, sold and bought, read, and reviewed" (39). Byron's conflation of the physical and the writerly body meant that he keenly felt the metaphorical dismemberment that his texts underwent in a "commercial culture conceived increasingly in feminine terms" (Hofkosh 38). Byron's sacrifice "to" women, as he put it in his letter to John Murray, consisted of catering to a female audience by using feminine modes such as the sentimental. McGann describes sentimental poetry as "sexually charged" (56) a form whose seductive potential Byron exploited by aligning the poetic persona with the writerly body thus commodifying and making himself available for consumption.⁽¹⁾ He was later to describe this kind of writing as "amorous writing" (*Don Juan* V:2), a term which again implies Byron's perception of the writer-reader transaction in corporeal terms.

<9>Christopher Anstey's epistolary *The New Bath Guide: Memoirs of the [Blunderhead] Family, a gently humorous account of fashionable Bath life*, in its account of "The Author's Conversation with his Bookseller" shows how female taste and purchasing habits had an impact on the culture of reading and literary production. Set in Slider the bookseller's shop, an author comes in to discuss the progress of the sales of his latest work, and overhears Slider's important customers Lady Bonton, Miss Bab and Mr Tightboot discuss his book in disparaging terms. Lady Bonton's complaint is that Slider doesn't stock any work that is:

...manly and spirited, nervous and strong;
Yet tender and delicate joys can impart,
And with sweet sensibility touches my heart.
(28-30)

She and her friends find the secluded author's work tedious, for his work lacks a moral and utilises classical allusions-or at least does not, unlike most writing of the day, use them to libellous purpose:

MISS BAB.
The subject's as good as the verse, Sir, I think:
Besides, he don't give us the least intimations,
What he means by his impudent insinuations.
LADY BONTON.
No--I wish that I knew who the person implied is,
In a certain account that he gives of Alcides:

I've try'd---but I can't make the least application
To any one man that I know in the nation.
MISS BAB.
Ma'am, the thing of all others he gives me the spleen in,
Is, the bringing in Pollux,---without any meaning.
(46-54)

The Author, wounded by this dismissal, remarks sotto voce: “Racks! tortures! damnation! death! hell! and confusion! They have no kind of taste for a classic allusion!” (55)

<10>After the exit of Slider’s clientele, the Author confronts him as to why he didn’t promote his work more, and the bookseller is forced to come clean, stating that only “blasphemy, bawdy, . . . treason” (139) are “vendible” (140). He urges the author to eschew the classics such as Pindar and Horace and instead write a “personal satire” (147) whose players are instantly recognisable for: “The ladies, you see, very justly remark, / That a reader should never be left in the dark”

(164-165). Anstey’s Author responds:

Mr. Slider, I’m under a thorough conviction,
Most authors fulfil that unhappy prediction;
And am glad the republic of letters think fit
To choose such respectable judges of wit,
(168-171)

Anstey’s satire is heartfelt; like many of his contemporaries he felt a deep resentment at the significant role female consumers played in shaping the tastes of the nation. The verisimilitude of this state of affairs portrayed in the poem is represented by the figure of the Author, who is Anstey himself, a fact made obvious by the reference to *The Patriot*, a work that Anstey wrote in 1767. Byron’s *The Blues: A Literary Eclogue* resonates with similar anxieties-though written in 1821, the world it conjures up is that of Regency London, when the Bluestockings held sway.

<11>Byron’s “strength” as defined by Jerome Christensen in his book *Lord Byron’s Strength* is born out of his aristocratic heritage, and is used in service of his political self, but his poetical self is entirely dependent on his audience. This contradicts Hannah Arendt’s definition of “strength” that Christensen uses:

“Strength”, she writes, “unequivocally designates something, and individual entity; it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them.” (xii)

Christensen suggests that Byronism “was collaboratively organized in the second decade of the nineteenth century by coding the residual affective charge that still clung to the paraphernalia of aristocracy in order to reproduce it in commodities that could be vended to a reading public and for glamour” (xii). However, herein lies the need to differentiate between “Byronism” and Byron’s own impression of himself as poet. Byronism is a marker of a fictive self created, fit for consumption, whereas Byron’s own vision of the authorial self was constantly in flux, created by consumption.

<12>Jonathan Gross argues that “Byron was not a libertine”(3); rather his ideology was closer to that of “cosmopolitanism” – a position that implied “intimate acquaintance with the physical body and the body politic”(4). Gross’ description of Byron as an “erotic liberal” reveals the tensions undergone by such a subject: “Erotic lovers are overwhelmed by passion, which they struggle in vain to control; libertines control others by controlling themselves” (3). His inclusion of “emancipation from nationalism”(4) as a characteristic of cosmopolitanism, therefore, seems at odds in its absolute nature, undermining his premise that “Byron flourished within the interstices, creating a place for himself in the limbo that exists between binaries” (G. Todd Davis, par.2).

<13>Byron’s early visions of himself as being part of a male political elite who would be responsible for the fate of the nation collided with his poetical ambition, whose success he envisioned as largely contingent on female reception. His poetic fame followed close on the heels of his political failure – both his maiden speech in the House of Lords and the overnight success of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* occurred within a space of ten days – determining the trajectory of Byron’s future career. Though McGann detects “a turn from “feminine” to “masculine” modes, a

turn from Anacreon to Horace and Homer” (56) in Byron’s poetry, this volte face that he describes as a “a typically Romantic act of displacement” can also be detected in Byron’s attitude towards England, albeit in inversion. No longer did Byron envision England as a space where

only the masculine life of action would be of consequence, but instead started to conceive of the nation in feminine terms. This conception in a sense acknowledges that gendered duality that defined the nation-state in its very earliest forms and shows Byron’s reconception of the ideals of civic virtue, which he initially outlines by negation in the trenchant *The Curse of Minerva*.

<14> In his Preface to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron cites Spenser and James Thomson as prominent influences on the work as well as quoting James Beattie, the author of *The Minstrel*:

Not long ago I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of composition. (CPW II:4)

Beattie’s description of the modes of poetry that he might deploy reads like a handy prospectus of the kinds of poetic style prevalent in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and could be descriptors, to use Lovejoy’s term, of the various kinds of “romanticisms” that emerged during that period. Thomas Woodman’s anti-teleological reading of poetic influence takes into account the

extent to which certain romantic poets are retrospective and work to establish continuities with eighteenth-century verse. There is room for another story to be written in these terms, one which acknowledges continuity and development but sees it as a repeated reading-back rather than a succession of anticipations. (9)

Spenser and Thomson’s palpable influence on Byron’s poetry before 1816 can be examined fruitfully with regards to their use of allegory and the nation. Byron alludes to Spenser in a bid to cast himself as an heir to the line of literary figures who defined England’s national literature, but also mentions Ariosto to highlight the influence of Continental literature on England’s literary tradition. Ariosto’s epic *Orlando Furioso* was an inspiration for Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, in his characterisation of a hero who embodied the qualities of a “good governour and a vertuous man” as well as in its use of allegorical figures.

<15> Historically the anxiety that female political authority provoked was articulated by John Knox in his notorious blast “against the monstrous regiment of women” that he published immediately before Elizabeth’s accession. His “description of a body politic with a female head” (Montrose 908) contemplated the potential corruption of masculine “wisdom, understanding, and courage of men, to the foolish fondness and cowardise of women” (4:374-75). When this anxiety was made flesh, as it were, with the accession of Elizabeth I to the throne, Spenser, in his epic *The Faerie Queene*, reconfigured the “Elizabethan political imaginary...the collective repertoire or representational forms and figures-mythological, rhetorical, narrative, iconic” (Montrose 907).(2) Montrose defines the place of the male subject in Elizabeth’s court as one who “by virtue of their status, office, education, and/or perceived moral rectitude-could claim a place in the political nation and a voice in the governance of the state” (911). The significance of the role of counsel in effective governance had been successfully established by Niccolo Machiavelli in his work *Il Principe*, written in 1513. The role of counsel, in the context of the English body politic, was equivalent to “free speech” and “to be conceived as both a duty and a right” (McLaren qtd. in Montrose 911). Though the authoritarian nature of Elizabeth’s rule did not openly sanction the publication of dissenting and seditious texts framed as “unsolicited public advice”, it was “widely disseminated in printed sermons and tracts, and in more oblique and coded form in pageants, plays and poems” (914).

<16> Byron’s historical moment obviously differed from Spenser’s in significant ways – at the time of the writing of *Childe Harold* England was under the rule of George III and then the Prince Regent – the latter of whose authority was constantly undermined by the hostility of a Tory government. But England was considered a cultural gynocracy, with the bluestockings and female novelists dictating the consumption of literature and the parameters of taste. Much in the same manner that circumstances had demanded Spenser’s reconception of the political imaginary, Byron realised, that if he hoped to still be of political consequence in England, he would have to address the phenomenon of gynocratic authority, and utilise it to his advantage. Displaced from

the “primary institutional locus for counsel ...the Parliament” (Montrose 911) and in keeping with his humanist heritage – as Anne Mellor has pointed out “Byron consciously adopted the persona of the “poet-statesman” inherited from Sir Philip Sidney and other Renaissance courtiers”(6) – he assumed the role of a counsellor, striving to both inform and critique his audience in the hope that it would ameliorate the polity, its tastes and the nation.

<17> Byron’s allusion to Thomson in his Preface to *Childe Harold* is possibly to highlight a reiteration of Thomson’s own statement in his prefatory note to *The Castle of Indolence*:

This poem being writ in the manner of Spenser, the obsolete words, and a simplicity of diction in some of the lines, which borders on the ludicrous, were necessary to make the imitation more perfect. And the style of that admirable poet, as well as the measure in which he wrote, are, as it were, appropriated by custom to all allegorical Poems writ in our language. (2)

Byron was inspired by Spenser and Thomson’s use of allegory as well as the georgic mode, which he sought to adapt and update in order to reflect his didactic purpose. Kevis Goodman designates the georgic as a versatile mode that exerts a “rhizomatic underpresence across a variety of affiliated descriptive and didactic verse genres” (2). Alan Liu in his book *Wordsworth and History*, compares the georgic mode to that of the “tour mode”, a recurrent mode in Byron’s oeuvre, and comments that their similarity lies in the capacity of both modes to make history “into the background, the manure, for landscape”(qtd. in Goodman 2).

<18>Jacqueline Labbe speaks of the growing lack of attractiveness of the “prospect view”, that would be less forgiving of industrialisation (x). Indeed, the eighteenth century georgic emerged possibly as a reaction to the increasing urbanisation of Britain and became more about landscape and topography rather than labour. If it did take labour to be its subject, it was transposed to the urban scene, as Byron’s title to *The Blues: A Literary Eclogue* metonymically suggests. The idea of “labour” in eighteenth century versions of the georgic, as Clifford Siskin has pointed out, is that of “professionalism” and denotes both mental labour as well as the physical (109). For Byron, torn between the professions of poet and politician, the georgic becomes a space to address the anxieties inherent to both.

<19>Labbe’s hypothesis of the “prospect view” as distinctly gendered holds interesting implications for Byron’s use of landscape and topography in his poetry. Labbe uses Addison to demonstrate how masculine imagination could only flourish in wide open spaces, which were “pleasing to the fancy” as opposed to “Confinement” which Addison equated with “when the Sight is pent up in a narrow Compass, and shortened on every side by the Neighborhood of Walls or Mountains”(ix). Masculine imagination thus defines itself by opposition to the lack of scope available in the feminine domestic sphere, circumscribed by the walls of manmade structures. John Barrell describes James Thomson’s “imaginative construct of the poet” as “seer or observer placed high on an eminence to whom the landscape is a prospect to be surveyed” (qtd. in Labbe x). Labbe believes that this construct is invested with “an ideal and a privilege, necessary to prove one’s right to govern and an indication that one is able to govern” (x). Much of Byron’s early poetry, that alludes to his aristocratic lineage, demonstrates Byron’s assumption of entitlement to this privilege. The action of his poems often take place in landscapes which in some way is nominally his domain: such as the “steep summit” that he scaled as “a young Highlander” in order

To gaze on the torrent, that thunder’d beneath,
Or the mist of the tempest that gather’d below;
Untutor’d by science, a stranger to fear,
And rude as the rocks, where my infancy grew,
(CPW I.47)

or in his commemoration of the “steep, frowning glories of dark Loch na Garr” (CPW I.103). Labbe concludes that

[V]isuality – the way one looks – is a power ineluctably linked both to the physical body whose eyes broadly survey, or minutely detail, the surrounding prospect, and to the social body, and the representations thereof, that provide the individual gendered body with its distinctions and privileges (xxi)

and that it is this visuality that defines Byron's poetic diction, particularly after his *annus mirabilis* 1812.

<20>Thomas Blundeville, the sixteenth century author of numerous navigational texts as well as the producer of the first separately printed work in English dedicated to the study of history, found the appeal of cartography lay in the fact that it made “visually accessible ‘the whole world at one view’” (qtd. in Gordon & Klein 1). In the introduction to their book on *Literature, Mapping and the Politics of Space*, Andrew Gordon and Bernard Klein show how the idea of cartography has influenced the way knowledge is organised and understood; they locate “the human body as the most intimately experienced spatial unit” then “the stage, the city, the nation, the imperial vision, to arrive finally, at the epistemological frameworks surrounding specific spatial constructs. In this way, body, stage, city, nation, empire, and-in a sense-epistemology, circumscribe and define lived cultural spaces in a series of imaginative enclosures, but in so doing they also assume a metaphorical currency in cultural discourse that transcends the immediacy of any direct spatial experience” (6). This “metaphorical currency” finds its expression in the gendering of the nation, especially in the nineteenth century when the idea of the nation began to gain impetus.

<21>Byron's near-contemporary, the French author Madame de Staël, was a female writer who Byron held in high regard, and referred to in unusually glowing terms as “the first female writer of this, perhaps any age” in a note to *The Bride of Abydos*. Though, as Joanne Wilkes has shown in her examination of their relationship they did not always see eye to eye, especially regarding the role of women in the nation. Glenda Sluga demonstrates that Madame de Staël, in her novel *Corinne or Italy*, equates the nation with her eponymous heroine; a manner of gendering the nation that Byron adapts when addressing England. This troping was not necessarily learnt only from de Staël – as Diego Saglia has demonstrated, there was a preoccupation with another similarly gendered nation during the Regency, Spain.⁽³⁾ Saglia quotes from William Ticken's *Santos de Montenos* to show the instrumental ideological role women played in Spanish society:

The influence of the female character in society, the influence of women in forming the moral character of a nation, is universally acknowledged; and though man boasts, in proud superiority, that himself is lord and master, yet follow this lordly being to his own domestic circle, follow him to the woman he loves, see there the soft influence, the irresistible magic, with which she . . . moulds him to her ideas, and forms him to her wishes. (1:v)

This quotation is paralleled by a statement Byron makes in his journal:

There is something to me very softening in the presence of a woman, – some strange influence, even if one is not in love with them, – which I cannot at all account for, having no very high opinion of the sex. But yet, – I always feel in better humour with myself and every thing else, if there is a woman within ken. (*BLJ* 3.246)

Saglia equates this “influence” with woman's role as mediator between the public and private spheres, a power that Byron was reluctant to acknowledge explicitly, but acquiesced with implicitly, as the example above reveals. Byron's disenchantment in *The Curse of Minerva* marks a shift from an idealised notion of the nation to a reified nationalism in the light of his increasing disillusionment with English foreign policy.

<22> Only eight copies of *The Curse of Minerva* were ever printed. Written as a castigation of Elgin's removal of the marble sculptures housed at the Parthenon, in Greece, Byron had intended it to be published along with *Hints from Horace and English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* in December 1811. However, his growing political ambition deterred him from wishing to antagonise such personages as Lord Holland, whom he satirised in *English Bards*, and he decided not to go through with its publication. In spite of this, the satire appeared in pirated extracts as “The Malediction of Minerva; or, The Athenian Marble Merchant” in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1815 (*CPWI*.446), and the privately printed copies enjoyed a wide circulation amongst London's elite and intelligentsia.

<23>Minerva appears as Pallas Athene to the narrator of the poem who is bemoaning the plunder of the sculptures of the Parthenon “Sacred to Gods, but not secure from Man” (60). She is represented divested of all her awesome glory:

Gone were the terrors of her awful brow,

Her idle Aegis wore no Gorgon now,
Her helm was dented, and the broken lance
Seemed weak and shaftless e'en to mortal glance;
The Olive Branch, which she still deigned to clasp,
Shrunk from her touch and withered in her grasp
(CPWI.323)

Byron's description of Athene shows her as the embodiment of both masculine, martial qualities, that have undergone emasculation "the broken lance/ Seemed weak and shaftless" as well as the feminine quality of fertility which has turned barren. Byron responds to Pallas Athene's tirade against Britain "once a noble name" thus:

"Daughter of Jove! in Britain's injured name,
A true-born Briton may the deed disclaim
Frown not on England, England owns him not:
Athena, no! thy plunderer was a Scot.
(CPWI.324)

Byron conflates England with Britain, referring to "Caledonia" (line 130) as a separate national entity. He returns to the vituperative rhetoric he employed in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers to criticise the land of his childhood. In doing so, he aligns himself with those English writers who chose to envision Britannia as personifying only England, reiterating this usage by using it interchangeably with Albion in much of his poetry. Interestingly, though the narrator tries to defend England against Athene's wrath, she seemingly ignores the distinction he makes between Scotland and England, and targets his "native shore" – an epithet that Byron used repeatedly in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – rather than Scotland. Byron then uses Athene as a mouthpiece to critique English foreign policy:

Though not for him alone revenge shall wait,
But fits thy country for the coming fate
Hers were the deeds that taught her lawless son
To do what oft Britannia's self had done.
Look to the Baltic – blazing from afar,
Your old Ally yet mourns perfidious war
Not to such deeds did Pallas lend her aid,
Or break the compact which she herself had made;
Farra from such councils from the faithless field
She fled – but left behind her Gorgon shield,
A fatal gift that turned your friends to stone,
And left lost Albion hated and alone.
(CPWI.327)

Byron thus uses Elgin and his plunder of the marbles as a convenient scapegoat for articulating his displeasure at England's desecration of those democratic ideals that marked the beginnings of the nation: "So may ye perish! Pallas, when she gave / Your free-born rights, forbade you to enslave" (lines 228-229). The actual purpose behind Byron's poem is to set out the wrongs of the British government, and to position himself as a fit commentator on these events; Athene's rhetorical "who shall dare to sing?" (line 245) is implicitly answered "Byron" in his very chronicling and critiquing of England's policy both at home and abroad. Even before his political debut, Byron was apprehensive about politics as this excerpt from a letter to John Hanson illustrates:

I have not yet chosen my side in politics, nor shall I hastily commit myself with professions, or pledge my support to any men or measures, but though I shall not run headlong into opposition, I will studiously avoid a connection with ministry. I cannot say that my opinion is strongly in favour of either party. . . I shall stand aloof, speak what I think, but not often, nor too soon. I will preserve my independence, if possible, but if involved with a party, I will take care not to be the *_last_ or _least_* in the ranks. . . So much for Politics, of which I at present know little and care less; by and bye, I shall use the senatorial privilege of talking, and indeed in such times, and in such a crew, it must be difficult to hold one's tongue. (BLJ I.40)

His wish to preserve his independence was a consequence of his lack of faith in the ineffectually

of the two party system that composed the British government for he wished to be “the man whose counsels may have weight” (line 274), a position that he felt might be undermined by pledging allegiance to either party, neither of whom he found particularly impressive.

<24>*The Curse of Minerva* does not only refer to Athene’s curse directed towards Britain as a consequence of Elgin’s act of plunder, but also to England as Britannia/Minerva’s current political situation, which Byron views as futile and in a state of deterioration. However, the “curse” also contains within it the paradox of the glories of imperialism – Athens, at the height of its power being as aggressively imperialist as England was in Byron’s time, but as a consequence, possessed the most enduring historical impact.

<25>Caroline Franklin’s significant book *Byron’s Heroines* enriched Byron studies by addressing the Byronic heroine, who appeared, as opposed to her “fairly consistent” male counterpart, in many guises: “from the eroticized passive victim of patriarchal force to the masculinized woman-warrior, from the romantic heroine of sentiment to the sexually voracious virago or the chaste republican matron, and so the list goes on” (1). Franklin successfully demonstrates that “Byron was constantly experimenting with the representation of women” (1). This “experimenting” as Franklin puts it, seems to find recurrent parallels with Byron’s contradictory figurations of nation in his poetry, not only in his portrayals of England but also of other nations such as Italy and Spain, striving to create what Jurgen Osterhammel has called a “transcultural comparative history” (Blom 5). Byron’s poetic career therefore is constantly affected by the two forces that he is the most anxious to seem inured to: female influence and nationalist feelings towards England, and the two forces shaped his sense of self for years to come.

Endnotes

(1)The instability this alignment engenders finds echoes in Byron's description of Juan in the London cantos, where in spite of his status: “. . .as a hero, young and handsome / Noble rich, celebrated, and a stranger” he:

Like other *slaves* of course must pay his ransom
Before he can escape from so much danger
As will environ a conspicuous man. (*Don Juan* XI.74)
(emphasis added)(^)

(2)Montrose quotes John Aylmer’s justification of Elizabeth’s rule but only in “terms of a rule that was limited and shared by a masculine political nation” :

It is not to England so dangerous a matter to have a woman ruler as men take it to be.
For first it is not she that ruleth but the lawes or executors whereof be her judges...2.
She maketh no statutes of lawes, but the honorable court for Parliament...3. If she
should judge in capitall crimes what danger is there in her womannish nature? none
at all. For the verdict is the 12. mennes (910).(^)

(3)Saglia remarks that:

the nationalist ideology woven around Spain by British writers combined this gendered imagery with the topos of the family as the basic social unit grounding the national community, and as the necessary throughway to shape society by means of language and fiction. By this measure, narratives on Spain illustrate how Romantic writing employed stereotypes of gender to represent the nation at war and often to recount teleological and epic versions of history. Fiction also reveals the unsettled rapport within Romanticism between a public sphere of human action and the private world of the domestic affections, as well as the complicity of the discourse of gender with a discourse on genus, race, and the nation. (365)(^)

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