Flirting With Fame: Byron's Anonymous Female Fans

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The John Murray Archive in London, now part of the National Library of Scotland, stands as a testament to the fact that Byron’s readers not only loved reading his poetry— and indeed made him the bestselling author of his time—but felt they loved him, the man, also.' Two boxes, which I examined at 50 Albemarle St before their journey north, are stuffed full of letters from anonymous admirers who felt compelled to write to Byron to express their interest in not only his poetry but his person. The vast majority of the letters in the archive are unsigned, undated and without an address, but it is often possible to ascertain the gender of the writer through his or her use of the personal pronoun—and the great majority of them are women.

These letters are unpublished and have rarely been viewed.' Their neglect is doubly surprising considering, first, how exhaustively examined the rest of the archive has been—almost all letters to and from Byron have been published in some form or other; and secondly, that texts which sit ‘at the limits of Romanticism’ have attracted so much critical attention in the last twenty years.' One would have expected that in the rush to investigate non-canonical works by neglected female authors—and previously marginalised, feminised forms of writing like letters and journals—in the 1980s and 1990s, Byron’s fan letters would not have been left so disregarded. While there has been a considerable amount of work done on the correspondence between Byron and well-known women such as Harriette Wilson and Caroline Lamb, the anonymous letters seem to have elicited little interest—a fact which demonstrates in itself just how important the writer’s name, the ‘author function,’ has become in our understanding of a text’s value.'

I intend to investigate these letters not only in terms of what they suggest about the way Byron’s poetry was read in the period in which he was writing, but also of what they reveal about the nebulous entity that has been roughly labelled ‘the female reader’ of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.' Although much of the letters’ interest lies in the fact they give individual voices to the anonymous mass of the ‘reading public’, it is possible to identify several common themes which unify them as a group. A vast majority of these women express feelings of alienation from the world, identification with Byron, and a desire to make some kind of contact with the poet. What is striking about these nineteenth-century letters is their expression of concerns and desires common to fan letters published in contemporary young women’s magazines. It seems useful, then, to examine the issues raised in the letters in the light of the ‘star’ theory which emerged as a subsection of film theory in the late 1970s.
While contemporary star theory seems an unlikely framework for an essay on a Romantic poet, one of the most accepted defining characteristics of Romantic writing—an elevation of the 'creative imagination, individual genius, and the inward self'—could also be seen as the principal tenet of Richard Dyer's pioneering celebrity study, *Stars*. Byron, as the popularly accepted 'first celebrity writer', fits particularly neatly into a Dyerian framework. Although star theory is chiefly concerned with actors, an actor is deemed a 'star' when their 'off-screen lifestyles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance'. Many recent essays have focused on the fact that Byron has been recognised as much for his life story, physical appearance and melancholic disposition as for his poetry. He was a star in the sense that his personality became just as much of a marketable commodity as his work itself, and he knew it.

Although the primary concern of this essay is the response of Byron's readers to his poetry and persona, I will begin by briefly investigating how the poet consciously courted female consumers through a process of 'flirtation' with the reader—an act which Adam Phillips defines as 'the (consciously or unconsciously) calculated production of uncertainty'. Byron created a poetry of ambiguity which encouraged readers to think that his characters were in fact him. Just as Byron flirts, so do his readers flirt back. I understand the anonymous letters in the Murray Archive as engaging actively in the dialogue which Byron initiates, as they appropriate the Byronic persona as an object of identification and imitation. This is the basis of the star–audience relationship in Dyer's theory, in which the members of the audience imagine themselves in the position of the star. In these letters, as in Byron's own poetry, fantasy and reality become almost indistinguishable.

Considered in a Dyerian framework, Byron was consciously performing the character of the Byronic hero in the context of an emerging literary marketplace. At the heart of Dyer's theory is the idea that the audience grows to feel as if they know a star because of the actor's development of an immediately recognisable and consistent persona. Dyer argues that a repetition of similar roles creates the illusion that an actor is not playing a character so much as themselves. Although this is often dismissed as a simple case of poor acting, Dyer emphasises the importance of this development of a 'type' early in the actor's career so that the audience creates an idea of who the actor 'really' is. Byron, in a sense, typecast himself in almost all of his major works. It has often been used as a criticism of Byron's work that Childe Harold, Manfred and Don Juan are all the same character—'Byron'. Yet the consistency of characterisation in Byron's works gave readers a familiar and reliable formula. When Byron abandoned his gothic style to write his historical plays, for example, he was attacked by his critics for writing 'inauthentic' works that were not truly Byronic.

The flirtatious 'uncertainty' of the Byronic hero is a primary characteristic of Byron's poetic style: the poet at once reveals and conceals biographical details about himself in a way which invites the reader to feel they have access to Byron's seemingly true self. In both his major poems, Byron teases the readers with occasional unambiguously biographical pieces of information but in, for example, the preface to *Childe Harold's*
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James Soderholm argues that Byron actually obscured as much as he revealed about himself in his so-called ‘confessional’ poems, suggesting that Byron’s ‘habit of appearing at once transparent and oblique’ was a deliberate attempt at self-styling. In Manfred, for example, Byron hints at his relationship with his half-sister, without ever referring to their liaison explicitly, teasing his readers and exciting their curiosity. Georg Simmel defines the ‘flirt’ as one who ‘awakens delight and desire by means of a unique antithesis and synthesis: through the alternation or simultaneity of accommodation and denial’. Byron’s simultaneous ‘concession and withdrawal’ of personal information was a blatant form of textual flirtation.

Byron is, as Lady Blessington puts it, ‘a perfect chameleon’ who is able to ‘[take] the colour of whatever touches him’. It is precisely this ambiguity which eighteenth-century readers may have found so appealing, largely because it gave the readers themselves an opportunity to construct their own ideas about the text. The unstable identity of Byron’s heroes meant that there was a great deal of scope for the active participation of the reader in Byron’s works. As Wolfgang Iser and other reader-response theorists have argued, the activation of the reader’s imagination occurs during ‘gaps’ in the text so that ‘the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking’ and, in a sense, creates the text. This may have been particularly attractive to female readers, as reading represented one domain in which early nineteenth-century women had the freedom not only to access knowledge previously available solely to men, but to experiment with different identities through literary fantasy. In a male-dominated order, in which marriage was prized as a satisfying resolution, flirting represents a ‘reckless adventurism’ which potentially undermined the status quo. By making the Byronic hero such an uncertain, open - flirtatious - text, Byron invites a response from his readers.

And respond they did. The letters in the Murray Archive make it clear that Byron’s performance of the Byronic hero was highly successful. The very fact that women wrote to Byron as if they knew him demonstrates how well Byron was able to create the illusion that his poetry offered access to his self. Many of the women seem to feel that they understand the workings of Byron’s mind completely, stating as fact, as one writer does: ‘You are unhappy — a being feared and mistrusted, even by those whom the fashion of the hour leads to flatter you — you are “alone on earth” — There needs no more to excite a deep interest for you — ’. Although many of the women apologise for the presumptuousness of writing to someone whom they have never met, they continually emphasise that they ‘know’ Byron through his poetry:

Your Lordship may perhaps smile [...] that one to whom you are personally entirely unknown should thus take the liberty of addressing you — But he who is known through the medium of his works, cannot be uninteresting even to a stranger. (MA i.8)

Many of them address him as ‘the Corsair’ and ‘Childe Harold’ as if he and his characters are almost interchangeable. One woman describes Byron’s poetry almost in

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human terms as a ‘companion’ who ‘converses’ with her, and in this way blurs the distinction between author and text: ‘Often have I wandered in these gardens with your poem for my companion & “with thee, conversing have forgot all time”’ (MA 2.12). This is similar to Harriette Wilson’s claim that she ‘took it [Don Juan] to bed’ with her and that it kept her up all night. Wilson inadvertently personifies the poem, suggesting that she sleeps with it as she would a lover. The fact that she thinks about Byron ‘all day’ while reading Don Juan indicates that her literary ‘lover’ is the author of the poem: the reader is seduced by an anthropomorphised text.

In many ways the letters in the archive confirm the fears expressed in the Christian and conservative press that the sexual nature of Byron’s flirtation would corrupt Britain’s female readers. There is certainly a strong sexual element to many of the letters in the Murray Archive, and a tendency for women to use eroticised language throughout their letters:

Though rais’d [?] the lowly Maid,
Who sighs thy Form to see,
Yet deign to pity that fond heart,
Which fluttering beats for thee.
Wild tumults in her bosom swell,
To hear thy conduct blam’d,
Thy genius, bright, transcendent worth,
Thy envious foes defam’d.
Oh! Had the pow’r around the brows,
Should crowns and laurel wreaths twine,
The highest bliss would ask on earth,
To be thy Valentine.

The writer continually uses terms with distinctly sexual connotation – she ‘sighs’ for Byron, drawing attention to her ‘bosom’ swelling with ‘wild tumults,’ referring to the ‘highest bliss’ she would feel if she were Byron’s ‘Valentine’. Another woman writes to Byron using obvious sexual metaphors: ‘Why, did my breast with rapture glow? / Thy talents to admire, / Why, as I read, my bosom felt? / Enthusiastic fire’ (MA 1.5). This is flirtation at its most overtly erotic.

Ghislaine McDayter notes that George Paston and Peter Quennell, when discussing the letters in To Lord Byron, assume that ‘women’s evident libidinal investment in Byron is restricted to the desire for a sexual encounter with the poet’. Paston and Quennell understand these ‘maenads’ as desiring to ravish Byron, and continually question any suggestion that the letter-writers may wish to have a non-sexual relationship with the poet. When discussing the letters of Henrietta D’Ussières, for example, they dismiss her desire to be just ‘a sister’ to Byron, rather, they insist that when women wrote to the poet, they ‘all had one object; but every one of them, alas, made a show of approaching that object in a devious and affectedly platonic manner’. Similarly they exclaim with shocked disbelief that even Harriette Wilson, the ‘most notorious courtesan of the period’, should profess in her letter ‘that what she wanted
was not love but intellectual understanding!” The assumption that female ‘fans’ necessarily want a sexual encounter with the object of their desire is discussed by Cheryl Cline in relation to fans of rock music. Cline argues that ‘the idea that women rock fans want to be groupies of the most craven sort is a strictly masculine daydream’ and argues that ‘in the classic female rock fantasy’ as expressed in modern ‘fanzines’, ‘the heroine is a musician, a journalist, a photographer — not a groupie’. Although fans are assumed to be ‘groupies’, their fascination with the star is based on a fantasy which is not necessarily sexual but puts the fan in a position of power.

The Murray Archive letters suggest that the same was true for Byron’s admirers. Ghislaine McDayter convincingly argues that women were interested not so much in actually having a sexual encounter with Byron, but in the fantasy of having a relationship with the poet. She suggests that their ‘lust’ for Byron was divorced from the ‘real world’, and that the poet acted only ‘as a space or setting for their fantasies’.

Using the typology of audience/star relationships as given in Andrew Tudor’s Image and Influence, Richard Dyer argues that the attraction to stars ‘cannot be based on sexual attraction’ alone, but is due to a perceived emotional affinity with the star, which leads to self-identification and ultimately projection and imitation. So while there is certainly a sexual element to the letter-writers’ flirtation with Byron, this dialogue takes place in a third space between platonic and sexual, a fantasy space of entirely imagined intimacy.

The letters demonstrate how the Byronic persona encouraged a deep emotional investment from Byron’s readers. The most-often quoted section of Byron’s poetry in the letters is from the third canto of The Corsair: ‘His heart was formed for softness — warp’d to wrong; / Betray’d too early, and beguiled too long’ (662–63). Byron’s correspondents address the quotation to him — ‘your heart’ — as if it were about the author rather than the fictional Conrad, with one woman adding ‘I cannot help believing the truth of the following lines as applied to yourself (MA 2.7). The interest in this particular quotation demonstrates the success of Byron’s formation of what Dyer would call ‘the Rebel’ character type and its strong appeal to women. Two in three of the letters contain some kind of rumination on how bad and misanthropic Byron is but that he is essentially ‘formed for softness.’ Much of this character type’s particular appeal is that although he is dangerous, there is a possibility for reform. Some women see themselves as potentially being able to make Byron happy: ‘But I must tell thee hope to meet, / And cast the cypress from thy brow’ (MA 1.12). Many others are more concerned to save Byron’s soul: ‘I am anxious that it should return to its natural bias before it is too late, that while you have time you should repent’ (MA 2.7). Others emphasise their own particular ability to help cure Byron’s melancholy: ‘the interest I feel — the eager wish for power to contribute (tho’ but a mite) to your happiness — arises from sympathy adding strength to compassion’ (MA 2.6). The peculiar simultaneity of malignancy and softness in the Byronic character type meant that women were able to place themselves in the role of Byron’s benevolent reformer.

Andrew Tudor emphasises the importance of this possibility for self-projection in the star—audience relationship, arguing that the audience member ‘places [herself] in
the same situation and persona of the star'.34 Many of the letters demonstrate Byron's readers' feelings of emotional affinity with the poet, even if their situation is quite different from his. The main characteristic of Byron's persona with which the readers seem to identify is his feeling of alienation from the world, often referring to their own 'deeply wounded spirit' (MA 2.3). One writer sees her situation as the same as Byron's even though her alienation is the product of rejection by her family on religious grounds: 'Like you... I am indeed the child of sorrow and misfortune, estranged from my former friends, and abandoned by my family for having from conviction embraced the Roman Catholic faith' (MA 1.17). Another draws a direct link between her emotional state and Byron's: 'Perhaps I am more alive to yr sorrows from being in sorrow myself' (MA 2.5). The Byronic hero is appropriated by these women as a method of describing themselves, so that the letters become less about Byron and more about their own personal situations and fantasies.

The women further engage with the dialogue of Byronsim by flirting with the poet through a process of concealment and revelation that mirrors Byron's own. This is indicative of the second component of the star–audience relationship, after self-identification: imitation.35 A woman who calls herself 'Rosalie' for example, offers tantalising pieces of information about her background, but then teasingly she claims she has revealed nothing:

[... ] she has not the presumption [... ] to attract the notice of Ld Byron, although her rank in life, and fortune, would entitle her to move in the same circle. She has been bred in 'disappointment's school,' and secluded from a world that youthful wishes led her to believe contained many charms [...]. Yet to Ld Byron she must ever remain conceal'd. (MA 2.11)

Her denial that she has exposed herself is reminiscent of Byron’s similar claim in the prefaces to Childe Harold and Don Juan. If anything, her insistence that she has remained concealed only draws attention to her previous disclosure. Georg Simmel sees this as a fundamental element of flirtation, in which 'refusal and the withdrawal of the self are fused with the phenomenon of drawing attention to the self'.36

The very fact that these letters are anonymous is in itself a form of textual flirtation. The letter is perhaps the most intimate medium for writing and yet, by concealing the name of the author, the writer teasingly suggests that her true self is inaccessible. The anonymity of these letters potentially gave women the same freedom as the masquerade ball which, along with church, was one of two places to which women were permitted to go unescorted in the early nineteenth century.37 The anonymity which resulted from disguise meant that women were free to speak and behave in ways not usually permitted in public settings: Harriette Wilson wrote 'I love a masquerade because a female can never enjoy the same liberty anywhere else'.38 The letters provide a chance for a kind of role play with Byron which the letter-writer controls. In a postscript to her letter, the woman who signs her name as 'Rosalie' suggests that she and Byron correspond in a newspaper: 'The sunday observer [sic] she can overlook with attention, and will seek with anxious solicitude for the very few lines that can meet
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The letters demonstrate Byron's novel treatment of letters, even if their situation is quite different from that of Rosalind. Antonio's persona with which the readers identified and often referred to their own situation as the same as Byron's was shared, in part, by his family on religious grounds. His misfortune, estranged from his family, finding him embraced by a medium, bearing the signature of Antonio (MA 2:n). Although Rosalie wants to make her anticipated textual flirtation with Byron public, she wishes their names to be disguised.

Once again, Rosalie is flirting with Byron in the Simmelian sense, through the 'concomitance of consent and refusal'.39 She is creating her own entirely fantastic relationship with Byron using the Byronic model of revelation/concealment as a springboard.

The star—audience relationship reaches its ultimate level when imitation of the star turns to projection. This occurs when a fan 'lives his or her life in terms bound up with the favoured star' to the point where the 'real world becomes constituted in terms derived from the "star world"'.40 This kind of projection is seen most clearly in the case of 'Echo', the only letter-writer who directly attempts to meet Byron. In a quotation of Byron's own work, the aptly aliased Echo writes in her first letter: 'The keenest pangs the wretched find / Are rapture to the dreary void / The leafless desert [sic] of the mind / The waste of feelings unemploy'd' (MA 2:13); in her next letter she decides to employ her feelings and asks him 'who bids the heart with wildest throbbing beat' (MA 2.13) to meet her:

Should curiosity prompt you, and should you not be afraid of gratifying it, by trusting yourself alone in the Green Park at seven o'clock this evening, you will see Echo... Be on that side of the Green Park that has the gate opening onto Piccadilly [sic], and leave the rest to Echo (MA 2.14).

Although Echo seems to be expressing a desire to move her fantasy relationship with Byron into the realm of the real, there is still a strong element of fancifulness in her letter. Echo casts herself in a position of almost predatory power, controlling the entire meeting; Byron, on the other hand, is like the damsel in distress, potentially afraid of walking in the park alone. Echo must have known that the chances of Lord Byron meeting a stranger in the park at a moment's notice were slim, and there is a sense that Byron's physical presence in this fantasy is almost irrelevant. By writing the letter, she is able to play the part of the mysterious, all-controlling 'Echo', and in a sense become the Byronic hero in her 'relationship' with Byron.

Having looked at the call of Byron and the response from his readers, the question remains as to whether the readers' replies echoed unanswered. Byron inspired so many textual responses to his work, but did these in turn affect his writing? The very fact that Byron kept all his fan letters suggests that he was certainly interested in his readers attitudes towards him and was not, as Lucy Newlyn suggests, '[impervious] to his own popularity'.41 Byron confessed to Thomas Medwin, 'I am sure I was more pleased with the fame my "Corsair" had, than with that of any other of my books. Why? for the very reason because it did shine, and in boudoirs. Who does not write to please women?'42 Byron targeted female consumers, and the letters from his fans would have acted as continual reminders of what his readers wanted from his writing. By the time he wrote Don Juan, Byron had received the vast majority of the letters in the Murray Archive. He knew how well his readers responded to the 'playful provocation'43 of the Byronic
persona and, perhaps accordingly, he made Don Juan the most outrageously flirtatious of all his works. This was not an authorial monologue, but an author–reader dialogue of the most intimate kind. With his textual flirtation, Byron invites the reader to invest themselves in his image and participate in the creation of the Byronism. This simultaneous consumption and creation caused a proliferation of Byronic texts which in turn made Byron — or rather, the Byronic persona — one of the most recognisable images of his era. As Byron’s poetry shone in boudoirs, so the author became a star.

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1 I would like to thank Virginia Murray for having granted me access to the John Murray Archive and for her kind assistance in my research for this essay.

2 The records at the Murray Archive show that the boxes of anonymous letters to Byron have only been viewed by one other academic researcher, Ghislaine McDayter, whose essay “‘Consuming the Sublime’: Gothic Pleasure and the Construction of Identity” along with George Paston and Peter Quennell’s To Lord Byron are the only scholarly texts I have found that mention these particular letters.

3 See Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson (eds), At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist and Materialist Criticism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 1–19.


9 See especially Frances Wilson’s introduction ‘Byron, Byronism and Byromaniacs’, in Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture, ed. Frances Wilson (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 9–13. Wilson extensively quotes earlier critics such as a reviewer in the London Magazine of 1821 who stated that ‘The personal interest, we believe, has always been above and beyond the poetical in Lord Byron’s compositions’; Arthur Symons later argued in 1909 that ‘Byron still lives with us with such incomparable vividness because he was a man first and a poet afterwards’ (10).


13 Phillips, Flirtation, p. xvii.


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