BYRON

THE ITALIAN LITERARY INFLUENCE

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To my Father and Mother
and to Madeleine

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P.V.

Preface

The biographical aspect of Byron's life in Italy has been extensively surveyed by a number of eminent Byron scholars, notably by Doris Langley Moore, Iris Origo and Leslie Marchand. On the literary side, however, there has been no extended treatment of the Italian influence since Claude Fuess's[1] competent but inadequate dissertation written more than fifty years ago. C. P. Brand's[2] fine survey of the Italianate fashion in early nineteenth-century England is too general in its scope to afford a detailed analysis of the Italian literary influence on Byron's poetry. R. D. Waller's[3] introduction to his edition of *The Monks and the Giants*, illuminating though it is on the nature of Italian burlesque poetry, rather surprisingly fails to assess Byron's indebtedness to Casti. More recent critical commentary on Byron's stylistic development has largely ignored the possibility of cross-cultural literary influences on his poetry. Indeed, most studies of Byron's poetical development over the past decade have tended to deal with the poetry as if it existed in a literary vacuum or as an appendage to the English burlesque tradition. Thus, for example, George Ridenour's[4] discussion of the mode of *Don Juan* treats the style of Byron's major work as the result of a process developed *pari passu* with his mature outlook on life, quite independently of his reading. Jerome McGann's[5] analysis of *Don Juan*, on the other hand, traces the style of Byron's epic to his constantly shifting stance, from the good-natured jesting of Horace to the high style of Juvenal, all but disregarding Byron's Italian models. Another recent study by A. B. England[6] argues that Byron's satirical style owes much to the English burlesque tradition of Butler and Swift and virtually ignores the possibility of the poet's debt to the Italian burlesque writers. In fact Robert Ogle's[7] doctoral dissertation on Byron's debt to the Bernesque satire is the only study of the poet's Italian models to appear recently, but it remains too inconclusive to be of any real value to the Byron scholar.

The question of literary influence is a difficult one, particularly for the scholar who seeks to establish a literary relationship between one poet and another. A literary affinity between authors may be due to a variety of factors which tend to complicate the issue. It may, for instance, be the result of a similarity in temperament and disposition, or the affinity in their works may have been induced by a common theme or it may even be due, as Shelley observed, to 'the endowment of the age in which they live'. Byron, in this respect, presents an especially hard problem. It is obvious from his letters and journals that he read widely, if not deeply, in the Italian authors who most appealed to him. His letters to Teresa Guiccioli show a good command of Italian and he himself expressed the desire to write his greatest work in that language. He took great pains over a verse translation of an excerpt from Dante's *Inferno* and another of the first Canto of Pulci's *Morgante*. Literary influence, as far as Byron was concerned, sometimes took the form of a direct borrowing of a few lines which caught his fancy, but more often it was the gradual process of an assimilation of a style which particularly appealed to him. In moments when inspiration seemed to flag, Byron, as Moore shrewdly observed, tended to look for stimulation in the authors he happened to be reading at the time. He had a remarkably retentive memory, as Lady Blessington noted, and he was quick to appropriate what he had read. This probably accounts for his eclectic borrowing from his favourite authors. Byron also wrote much of his later poetry with Murray's literary coterie in mind and he expected the Italian scholars Merivale and Rose to recognise the literary allusions he deliberately interspersed among his verses.

The aim of this study is to discover the extent of Byron's reading in Italian literature and *belles-lettres* and to illustrate how his reading helped to shape his poetry. This book is not so much an exercise in literary detection as an attempt to show the poet in dialogue with his sources, the divergencies being often as illuminating as the poet's actual imitation.

The study concentrates largely but not exclusively on Byron's debt to Casti and Pulci for the satirical mode of *Beppo*, *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement*. It is hoped that this book will afford fresh insights into the nature of Byron's significant debt to the Italian authors he read and enjoyed.

Contents

1 Byron's Early Italian Interest

I

Byron was able to read Italian long before he set foot in Italy. By the time he was eighteen he had dipped into Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and had some knowledge of Dante's *Inferno* and felt confident enough to display his little learning in a humorous letter to John Pigot expressing his gratitude for his 'kind connivance' at rescuing him from 'Mrs Byron Furiosa' in one of her tantrums:

> Oh! for the pen of Ariosto to rehearse in *Epic* the *scolding* of that *momentous Eve*, or rather let me invoke the Shade of Dante to inspire me, for none but the author of the 'Inferno' could properly preside over such an attempt.[1]

Towards the end of 1813 Byron was thinking in terms of settling in Italy or the East and he hoped thereby to drink 'deep of the languages and literature of both'.[2] His first acquaintance with the Italian language, interestingly enough, seems to have taken place at a Capuchin monastery during his sojourn in Athens where he accidentally came across a work in thirty volumes on the history of Italy in old and not 'very choice Italian'[3] which he read through with the help of a Capuchin friar. Byron subsequently developed an abiding interest in Italian history and literature – an interest which, as we shall see, was to have an appreciable influence on the manner and method of composition. Byron's ability to read the Italian authors was achieved with considerable effort and application on his part. The Catalogue[4] of his books for auction in 1816 indicated that he had acquired quite a few dictionaries and grammars of the Italian language in order to assist him in his self-imposed task. These included Baretti's *Italian Dictionary* (the 1813 edition), Veneroni's *Italian Grammar* (1806), Graglia's *Guide to Italian* (1803) and Zotti's *Vocabolario Italiano* (1801) in four volumes. The path to the Italian pastures was arduous but not

without its rewards. His Italian reading continued to flourish even though he was fully engrossed in his amatory affairs. He scoffed at James Wedderburn Webster's ignorance of and insensitivity to the great Italian authors. To Lady Melbourne, his confidante, he remarked facetiously:

> W[ebster] grows rather intolerable too – he is out of humour with my *Italian* books – (Dante & Alfieri & Some others as harmless as ever wrote) and requests that sa femme may not see them – because forsooth it is a language which doth infinite damage!![5]

In a serious vein, a month later, he recorded in his journal that Ariosto, Dante and Tasso were among the great authors he had read. His familiarity with the language enabled him to carry on a flirtation with an Italian Opera singer at Cheltenham. 'I always strive to repair ye inroads want of practice make in my memory of that dearest of all languages'[6] – he jokingly confessed to Lady Melbourne. Very probably he discussed the Italian authors with Annabella Milbanke who at the time had also developed an interest in Italian literature, especially Ariosto.[7] In his letter of 25 August 1814 he sought to guide Annabella's reading on the subject and enthusiastically recommended Sismondi's *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe* as the best available introduction to the Italian authors.[8] An entry in his journal for 1813 is of particular interest because it shows the poet's first attempt to write a few exclamatory verses in Italian.[9]

Byron's reading of the Italian authors was at this time unsystematic and desultory. He read Petrarch, excerpts from Machiavelli and Bandello 'by starts'. The sonnets of Petrarch stimulated him to imitation and emulation but the result was none too felicitous, as he himself felt obliged to admit:

> Redde some Italian and wrote two sonnets . . . I never wrote but one sonnet before, and that was not in earnest, and many years ago, as an exercise – and I will never write another. They are the most puling, petrifying stupidly platonic compositions. I detest the Petrarch so much that I would not have been the man, even to have obtained his Laura, which the metaphysical whining dotard never could.[10]

The sonnets in question were those entitled 'To Genevra' and were first published in the second edition of *The Corsair*. Charles Du Bos ascribed the sonnet to 'the Lady Frances Cycle' maintaining that they were written with Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster in mind. It is very likely, however, that the sonnets, as their title implies, were written to express Byron's sublimated feelings for Augusta at a time when his relationship with his half-sister had become intimate. The poems were actually composed on 17 and 18 December 1813 during which time Byron came to realise that:

> . . . no woman was so comforting and satisfying to his self-esteem as Augusta, so yielding to his every wish, so sensuous and undemanding, and so motherly and protective at the same time.[11]

The actual title of the sonnets was a clear hint to the public at large that Augusta was the subject of these platonic compositions. Genevra, in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was the daughter of the King of Scotland and beloved sister of the dashing Prince Zerbino with whom Byron felt a strong affinity. Those members of the reading public who were acquainted with the *Furioso* would be reasonably expected to take the hint. Byron's dissatisfaction with the sonnets presumably stemmed from his realisation that the complexity of his feelings for Augusta could not be convincingly expressed in an outmoded literary form.

Machiavelli's *Storie Fiorentine* and Bandello's *Novelle* helped to foster an interest in the colourful historical personages of the turbulent Renaissance. 'I am mightily taken with Braccio di Montone, Giovanni Galeazzo and Eccelino. But the last is *not* Bracciaferro (of the same name), Count of Ravenna, whose history I want to trace', he recorded in his journal.[12] Impressed by Henry Fuseli's painting of Ezzelin, he wrote to the artist enquiring after the subject of the painting:

> I have been looking in vain. Mr. Fuseli, for some months, in the poets and historians of Italy for the subject of your picture of Ezzelin – pray where is it to be found?[13]

This concern with literary authenticity and the urge to trace the subject to the ascertainable facts are characteristic of Byron's cast

of mind. The character of Conrad in *The Corsair* was partly based on Sismondi's account of Ezzelin in his history of the Italian republics as Byron himself acknowledged in a note to the poem.[14]

Bandello's *Novelle* attracted the poet mainly because of their literary recasting of well-known historical anecdotes. He requested Murray to secure for him at an auction sale an Italian edition in nine volumes of Bandello's works. Indeed, Bandello was one of his main sources for his *Parisina* in which he sympathetically treated the tragedy of the hapless Parisina Malatesta, second wife of Niccolo d'Este, fated to fall in love with her stepson Hugo. Gibbon had adumbrated the tragic event in his *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick*[15] but in Bandello's account Byron found a fuller treatment of the tragedy in all its psychological complexity,[16] which corroborated and sometimes contradicted the facts in his other source – Antonio Frizzi's *Memorie per la Storia di Ferrara*. The moral ambivalence of Bandello's version which was the result of the Italian author's attempt to exculpate Parisina's love while at the same time condemning her crime ('la commessa scelleraggine'),[17] must have had a particular appeal to Byron who was at the time both fascinated and repelled by his incestuous relationship with Augusta. Indeed, *Parisina* was the outcome of Byron's inward convulsions which perforce had to end in rhyme.[18] Bandello's version, then, must have afforded the poet interesting fresh insights into the delicate theme of incest, thus enabling him to re-enact his own predicament in terms of the plight of Hugo and Parisina. In Frizzi's account of the story of the House of Este which was originally appended to Byron's poem, the Marquis Niccolo is portrayed as the outraged father and husband who is relentless in his obsession with strict justice while Parisina is the victim of her inordinate passion. Bandello's version, however, focuses on the sad plight of Parisina and she is presented in a more favourable light as the tragic victim of deception and adverse circumstance. Her love for the young Hugo (they are both of the same age) is far from wanton and she is given adequate psychological motivation. She claims that she has been neglected by her husband who was, in Bandello's words, 'si diede di si fatta maniera dietro a le femine che in Ferrara e per il contado non ci è cantone ove egli non abbia alcun figliuolo bastardo'.[19] Moreover, she laments the fact that she is the victim of a cruel deception in that although she had been promised in marriage to

the handsome Hugo, her father and the Marquis had determined otherwise:

> Avesse pur voluto Iddio che di me quello fosse avvenuto che io già sperai, imperció che quando primieramente il signor mio padre mi ragionó di maritarmi in Ferrara, egli mi disse ch'io dovevo sposarmi con voi e non con vostro padre; ne so io come poi il fatto si mutasse. Che Dio perdoni a chi di cotal baratto fu cagione![20]
>
> (If only God had wished that what I hoped for might happen, the reason being that when his Lordship my father persuaded me to marry in Ferrara, he told me that I was to marry you and not your father; and I do not really know how things changed. May God forgive the person responsible for that deal!)

In Byron's *Parisina* the focus has been shifted from Parisina's pathetic complaint to Hugo's dignified stance in the presence of his irate father but the reasons behind Hugo's self-justification remain basically the same as those given by Parisina in the Bandello version. Hugo, too, complains that the Marquis his father had selfishly neglected his first wife ('thou work'dst my mother's ill') and deprived him of the woman he loved ('And made thy own my destined bride').[21] Following Bandello, Byron heightens the dramatic import of his story by attributing the tragedy which befalls the Este family to a kind of Nemesis which afflicts the Marquis for his past wrongs.

> 'Tis true that I have done the wrong –
> But wrong for wrong; – this, – deem'd thy bride,
> The other victim of thy pride, –
> Thou know'st for me was destined long;
> Thou saw'st, and coveted'st her charms
>
> (xiii, 252–6)

The conclusion of *Parisina* with its 'controlled pathos' shows a striking affinity with Bandello's treatment of the tragic end of Parisina and her lover. Despite his defiant stand, Hugo is contrite and resigned in the end, with the poet uncharacteristically preserving the Christian 'moralitas' of timely repentance:

As his last confession pouring
To the monk, his doom deploring
In penitential holiness.
He bends to hear his accents bless
With absolution such as may
Wipe our mortal stains away.

(xvi, 413–18)

In Bandello's novella, Hugo spends his last day in the company of two friars:

> Il contrito giovane perseverò tre continovi giorni in compagnia dei due frati, sempre di bene in meglio disponendosi a la vicina morte e ragionando di cose sacre.[22]
>
> (The repentent youth remained three whole days in the company of the two friars, gradually reconciling himself to his approaching death, and discussing sacred matters.)

Parisina, however, remains unrepentant and inconsolable. Regardless of her own fate she cannot be reconciled to the death of her lover:

> nulla o poco de la sua morte incresceva ma che di quella del Conte Ugo non poteva aver pazienza.[23]
>
> (She was hardly concerned about her impending death, but she could not resign herself to that of Count Hugo.)

In frenzied despair she calls the name of Hugo:

> Ella altro giorno e notte mai non faceva che chiamar il suo Ugo, di modo che per tre continovi giorni che in pregione dimorò sempre nomando il Conte Ugo se ne stette.[24]
>
> (Day and night she called her Hugo, so that throughout the three days she spent in prison she repeatedly called the name of Count Hugo.)

Byron's Parisina behaves in a similar manner. She is silent throughout and her only concern is for Hugo ('Less for her own

despair than him'). Her inexpressible anguish has its outlet in a demented shriek of despair. It is evident from what has been said above that Byron had Bandello's novella in mind when he composed *Parisina* during his honeymoon at Halnaby in the autumn of 1815 and he skilfully remoulded the source to his own desire by concentrating largely on the dignified bearing of Parisina and Hugo.

Parisina also owes something to Scott's *Marmion*. As Byron reluctantly acknowledged to Murray, he might have borrowed inadvertently from Scott's poem and he accordingly sent for a copy of the original for, as he admitted, 'it comes upon me not very comfortably'.[25] The passage in question was that which described Constance de Beverley's fearless appearance before the Conclave in Canto II of *Marmion* in which the judges are struck by her noble and spirited defence.[26] Although there are no direct verbal echoes, Byron's treatment of the same scene is strikingly similar and it would seem to justify Byron's uncomfortable feeling. It is also possible to suggest, however, that both Byron and Scott may have been influenced by a common source. It is indeed highly probable that they were both acquainted with Boccaccio's celebrated account of Ghismunda's dignified stand on behalf of her lover Guiscardo when she was arraigned before her stern father Tancredi. Here is Boccaccio's account of the scene:

> Per che, non come dolente femina o ripresa del suo fallo, ma come noncurante e valorosa, con asciutto viso e aperto e da niuna parte turbato, così al padre disse: 'Tancredi, nè a negare nè a pregare son disposta, per ciò che nè l'un mi varebbe nè l'altra voglio che mi vaglia; e oltre a ciò in niuno atto intendo di rendermi benivola la tua mansuetudine e 'l tuo amore: ma, il ver confessando, prima con ver ragioni difender la fama mia e poi con fatti fortissimamente seguire la grandezza dello animo mio. Egli è vero che io ho amato e amo Guiscardo, e quanto io viverò, che sarà poco, l'amerò, e se appresso la morte s'ama, non mi rimarrò d'amarlo . . .[27]

> (Therefore, she thus spoke to her father, not as a repentant woman conscious of her wrongdoing, but regardless and brave, by no means perturbed: 'Tancredi, I am not disposed to deny or beg, since the first would not help my case and the second I am disinclined to do, besides in no way do I wish to rely on your

> benevolence and love; but by confessing the truth first I would with true reasons defend my honour and then with strong deeds follow the nobility of my sentiments. It is true that I love and have loved Giuscardo, and so far as I live, which will not be for long, I will love him and being the closer to death I will not cease to love him.')

The passage is indeed one of the finest in the *Decameron*: Ghismunda courageously asserts her love for the low-born Guiscardo against her father's intransigence even though she is fully aware of the terrible consequences. She refuses to plead with her father but calmly maintains that she will follow her ruling passion with true nobility of spirit ('seguire la grandezza dello animo mio').[28] Her defence is both a justification of her love for Guiscardo and a rebuke of her father's wilful prejudice. Tancredi, for his part, wavers between admiration for his daughter's spirit and a relentless will to impose his own kind of justice:

> Conobbe il prenze la grandezza dell'animo della sua figliuola, ma non credette per ciò in tutto lei si fortemente disposta a quello che le parole sue suonavano, come diceva . . . e commandò a'due che Guiscardo guardavano che senza alcun romore lui la seguente notte strangolassono . . .[29]
>
> (The Prince recognised the nobility of his daughter's spirit but did not however believe that she was so strongly disposed to the drift of her words . . . and ordered the two who guarded Guiscardo to strangle him on the quiet the following night.)

The parallel with Parisina is, I think, inescapable.

II

The first stage of Byron's self-imposed journey of exile was from a literary point of view the most productive of his poetical career. In the short space of three months he composed four poems including the stanzas of Canto III of *Childe Harold* and the poetical drama *Manfred*. He also came into contact with Shelley, Monk Lewis and the voluble but brilliant Madame de Staël, all of whom helped to stimulate Byron's literary interests. Shelley, we are told,