

THE BYRON SOCIETY OF AMERICA

## Interpreting Byron's Poetry and Life with McGann's *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*

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Early reviews of Jerome McGann's edition of Byron's *Complete Poetical Works* (1980-1993) observe that the previous major scholarly collection was the late-Victorian edition by E. H. Coleridge eighty years earlier (1898-1904). Important as Coleridge's edition was, it also had many limitations, including the lack of numerous manuscripts and proofs which had become available since his time.<sup>1</sup> Some poems in *CPW* do not even appear in Coleridge's edition, and could only be found in scattered, obscure sources.<sup>2</sup> The quality of the source matters in particular for Byronists because we are so often juggling both the literary text and the author's biography, endeavoring to understand Byron's poetry in the context of his life—or rather in terms of his fictionalizing of that life.<sup>3</sup> Before *CPW*, this interpretive task required considerably more work. I would like to give two examples of the difference between using *CPW* and using older sources when interpreting Byron's poetry in connection with his life. These are two poems which I understand differently because of the answers McGann's edition provided and the questions it raised. Byron's "To Ianthé" and "Go—

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<sup>1</sup> "Since the last scholarly edition of Byron's collected poetry by E. H. Coleridge, published between 1898 and 1904, a vast number of manuscripts and proofs have come to light" (Levine, Review of *Complete Poetical Works* 178).

"E. H. Coleridge... at the turn of the twentieth century issued the last major scholarly edition of the poetry" (Chandler 208).

"For the past eighty years, we have been dependent largely on the monumental efforts of E. H. Coleridge" (Fraistat 152).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., "Go—triumph securely."

<sup>3</sup> Many Byronists have connected Byron's own identity to his self-representation—noting that his poems reimagine his life, with varying degrees of alteration (Manning 12; Graham, *Don Juan* 27–28; Barton 12; Graham, 'Myth' 30), and that his work (as Jerome McGann and Peter Manning have both observed) is 'self-dramatizing' (McGann, *Fierly Dust* 280; Manning 17).

triumph securely” both feature fictional roles assigned to the speaker and the addressee, fictionalized versions of Byron and those he knew; in both cases, the timing of the poem and of its textual variants makes an important difference to the poem’s meaning.

Here’s my first example. Not long ago I was studying “To Ianthe,” the prefatory poem to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, in the context of Byron’s relationship to the girl he calls “Ianthe”: his lover’s young daughter, Lady Charlotte Harley. I consulted both Coleridge’s edition and McGann’s, and the experience of using each was very different.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the difference between Coleridge’s and McGann’s edition is stark when it comes to documenting the different texts and sources for “To Ianthe.” Coleridge provides three notes on textual variants for “To Ianthe,” covering the title and four lines, in each case giving a single variant reading. *CPW*, on the other hand, notes variants in 33 lines, comparing four different sources,<sup>5</sup> some of which can be dated quite precisely. Coleridge offers some pertinent biographical details but not enough to construct a timeline. *CPW*, on the other hand, provides enough bibliographic and biographical mileposts to begin to piece together the parallel evolution of the poem and Byron’s relationship with the addressee.

The timeline particularly matters when paying attention to the fictionalizing name Byron gives his addressee: “Ianthe.” Both Coleridge and McGann mark the name as a meaningful one: “Ianthe (Flower of the Narcissus),”<sup>6</sup> and commentary on the poem and on Byron’s relationship with

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<sup>4</sup> Coleridge and McGann each give five explanatory notes (Coleridge 11-14; *CPW* 2.272-273), but other resources are far more detailed in *CPW*.

<sup>5</sup> Four versions are cited in notes on textual variants: “L,” “MI,” “MI and proof”/“MI proof,” “H.”

- Two (2) versions in the Murray archives (if the two proofs are treated as one, as it seems they are) [a]: “fair copy of ‘To Ianthe’... (MS. MI) and two proofs of the lyric with B’s holograph corrections” (*CPW* 2.267)
- One (1) version in the Huntington Library [e]: “an incomplete set of proofs for the seventh edn. of *CHP* I-II, with B’s corrections... (MS. H)” (*CPW* 2.268)
- One (1) version in the Lovelace papers, Bodleian Library [j]: “‘To Ianthe’ (draft MS. lacking stanza 2, untitled)... (MS. L)” (*CPW* 2.268)

<sup>6</sup> *CPW* 2.273, n37; cf. Coleridge 13, n2.

the real Charlotte has drawn on the name's significance.<sup>7</sup> But using the name 'Ianthé' as an interpretive key is complicated by its place in the timeline of revision: the name 'Ianthé' is a relatively late addition. Coleridge does not make this timeline clear. He does note that the original title of the poem is not 'To Ianthe' but 'To the Lady Charlotte Harley,'<sup>8</sup> but he provides no textual variants for the name 'Ianthé' in the *text* of the poem, as McGann does.<sup>9</sup> *CPW* makes it clear that the name 'Ianthé' does not appear at all in the earliest versions of the poem, and in fact that Byron did not actually add the name 'Ianthé' until he was making corrections to the proofs shortly before printing.<sup>10</sup> The seeming contradiction is evident in *CPW*—a name important to interpreting the poem which is one of the very last revisions to it.

How many research projects begin with one question, one anomaly? This anomaly prompted me to investigate the timeline of the use of the name Ianthe in connection with the poem and the proposed illustration for it. That investigation turned up a letter by Charlotte's mother, Lady Oxford, details about the family's relationship with Byron, and more about how Lady Oxford nudged Byron regarding politics, pictures, and publishing.<sup>11</sup> I also learned that although the name "Ianthé" was only added to the poem in edits to the proofs, this pseudonym was attached to Charlotte long before, supporting the argument that it could be an interpretive key.

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<sup>7</sup> Critics frequently link the name 'Ianthé' to the meaning 'flower of the narcissus', or to Ovid's myth of Iphis and Ianthe, or to both, implying the name is a significant one that contributes to interpretation (cf. Levine, ed., *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, p. 25n). Benita Eisler explicitly writes that the allusion to Ovid is a 'telling' one (Eisler, *Byron*, p. 385n). Eisler also describes an innocence consisting of a mental blankness reminiscent of Locke's 'white Paper': Charlotte was 'as unconscious of her own perfection as a flower' (Eisler 385). Like Rousseau warning that a child is like a plant that can be warped by interference, Fiona MacCarthy evokes the vulnerable passivity of innocence, writing that Byron describes Charlotte as a 'fragile flower' (MacCarthy 195). (Cf. McCune, "'Attract thy fairy fingers'" 38 for the larger interpretive pattern.)

<sup>8</sup> Coleridge 11, n. i.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Coleridge 13 and *CPW* 2.8, n39.

<sup>10</sup> *CPW* 2.6, 2.8; Lady Oxford (and Charlotte) left in June and Byron corrected the proofs in December (*BLJ* 3.69, 3.201).

<sup>11</sup> McCune, "Letter of Lady Oxford's."

In my interpretation, this fictional role Byron imagines for Charlotte is more active than some other critics have suggested.<sup>12</sup> Here, on the level of interpretation, *CPW* provides an alternate reading (absent in Coleridge) that makes Byron's metaphor clearer. In "To Ianthe", Byron speaks of love not as an emotion which active lovers express to a passive Charlotte, but as something radiating from Charlotte like light: he writes of her 'charms which varied as they beam'd' and how her 'ripening beauties shine'. The poem describes her eyes as 'brightly bold' and says they 'dazzle' the viewer because they do not take in light, but rather emanate light.<sup>13</sup> This light is not only marvelous, but dangerous. In an early draft, when her eye dazzles a man, it 'wounds as it wins'—a variant which does not appear in Coleridge.<sup>14</sup> The sense is that the light from her eyes penetrates a man's heart like an arrow: this explains why, in the final version of the poem, 'all younger hearts shall bleed' (24). Thus, her shining eyes compel men to love her; this is 'the doom [her] eyes assign' (25). Byron is casting Charlotte in the role of an active and powerful lover, who does not wait to be won over by others, but 'wins' their hearts with her own 'bold'—and piercing—gaze (29–30).

Another example of the useful tools *CPW* provides which older sources do not is the poem "Go—triumph securely," which did not even appear in Coleridge, nor in any other collection before *CPW*.<sup>15</sup> The poem does appear in a few scattered print sources, but each of these derives from a

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<sup>12</sup> If Charlotte's adult life is any indication of her childhood, Byron's imaginary description of Charlotte as more active than passive may have had some basis in fact. Her masculine manner and clothing, and her use of strong language, shocked respectable matrons (Macaulay 307–308; Hawkes and Smithes 148). She married a cavalry officer and used to ride around with her husband and his men when he served in the Portuguese civil war, and she laughed when fired upon by the enemy (Glegg 81; Tolmer 1.27–28).

<sup>13</sup> "To Ianthe", 7, 22, 29–30.

<sup>14</sup> *CPW* 2.7, n30.

<sup>15</sup> *CPW* 3.393.

single manuscript, and they seem unaware of other versions published years before.<sup>16</sup> *CPW* collates and describes older print sources but uses as its copy text Byron's holograph fair copy, which had not been previously published.<sup>17</sup> Not only does *CPW* make this previously uncollected poem available to critics with a newly authoritative text, it also sheds considerable light on the biographical context of the poem, in three ways.

First, the addressee of the poem becomes clear. In the nineteenth century, it was speculated that the poem was addressed to Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster.<sup>18</sup> But as McGann observes in *CPW*, Byron used the penultimate stanza of "Go—triumph securely" to describe Lady Caroline Lamb in 1812, years before he repurposed the lines in a draft of a poem for Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster.<sup>19</sup> Thus, *CPW* makes a compelling case that Lady Caroline Lamb is the addressee, and that Byron is addressing her at the very time he is "breaking off relations" with her<sup>20</sup> and transferring his affections to Lady Oxford.<sup>21</sup> As McGann observes elsewhere, there is a definite perversity to the dishonest depiction of their relationship in "Go—triumph securely":<sup>22</sup> the poem

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<sup>16</sup> The exception is the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which is responding to the *Quarterly Review* earlier the same year.

Pre-*CPW* print sources:

- Brummell biography, [1844] (from album in Brummell's hand) (*CPW* 3.393; for date cf. McCune, "Unique Text" 37, n15)
- Excerpt in *Quarterly Review*, 1869 (from MS with Ly Charlotte Harley) (McCune, "Unique Text" 36ff)
- *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1869 (from MS with Ly Frances Vernon Harcourt) (McCune, "Unique Text" 36ff)
- Martin in *N&Q*, 1967 (from MS in Ly Anne Hardy's hand, *MS. H*, in turn copied from MS with Ly Langdale) (*CPW* 3.393)

MS. sources:

- Byron's fair copy, *MS. T* (*CPW* 3.393)
- Excerpt in Byron's letter to Ly Melbourne (*CPW* 3.393)

<sup>17</sup> *CPW* 3.16n, 3.393.

<sup>18</sup> *CPW* 3.16n, 3.393; McCune, "Unique Text" 38.

<sup>19</sup> *CPW* 3.320, 3.393, 3.475.

<sup>20</sup> *CPW* 3.393.

<sup>21</sup> McCune, "Unique Text" 35.

<sup>22</sup> McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* 61-62.

imagines that Caroline Lamb will inevitably be “false”<sup>23</sup> to Byron, whereas in reality it is Byron who is false to her. By identifying the addressee, *CPW* illuminates another layer of meaning to the poem, and reveals just how much Byron was willing to fictionalize his life in it.

*CPW* sheds further light on the poem by identifying its audience. Byron did not publish the poem; instead, our sources are Byron’s friends. He sent a fragment to his confidante, Lady Melbourne. Byron’s friend Beau Brummell made a copy of the poem, which was published in Brummell’s biography after he died.<sup>24</sup> The other versions all come from the home of Byron’s lover, Lady Oxford (one of these was copied by Lady Anne Hardy, the others were published in periodicals long after Byron’s death).<sup>25</sup> In short, Byron only shared the poem with a close circle who knew more about Byron’s private life than his reading public did—and at least in the case of Lady Melbourne and Lady Oxford, these were friends who knew more about the end of his affair with Caroline Lamb than anyone else.

Finally, the variant readings of the poem included in *CPW* show us something about Byron’s fictionalized depiction of himself in this poem, the role he plays. Anticipating the lady’s future betrayal, the speaker of the poem describes his response as a balance between childlike emotion and manly fortitude.

In all the texts, the speaker says he will “bear like a man what I feel like a child,”<sup>26</sup> but in the previous line some versions stress the speaker’s childlike emotions: “Ashamed of my weakness however beguiled.”<sup>27</sup> Later in the same versions, the speaker compensates for this vulnerability by refusing to definitely confirm his emotions: “*If a frown cloud my brow ... / If my heart should seem*

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<sup>23</sup> “Go—triumph securely” line 16, cf. “falsehood” line 20.

<sup>24</sup> *CPW* 3.393; McCune “Unique Text” 35-37.

<sup>25</sup> *CPW* 3.393; McCune “Unique Text” 36.

<sup>26</sup> “Go—triumph securely” line 8.

<sup>27</sup> “Go—triumph securely” line 7 in *MS. T*; cf. Brummel.

heavy.”<sup>28</sup> Other versions do *not* say he is ashamed of his weakness; instead, they emphasize the speaker’s manly restraint, what he can “bear like a man”: “Not a sigh shall escape from the heart thus beguil’d.”<sup>29</sup> Having asserted his adult fortitude, the speaker may later enlist his emotions as further evidence of his maturity, empathizing with the lady despite her unworthiness: “*Though* a frown cloud my brow, yet it lowers not on thee.”<sup>30</sup>

In “Go—triumph securely,” Byron’s self-image is balanced between opposing age-based roles: he is both “feel[ing]” emotional pain “like a child” and “bear[ing it] like a man.” Readers with access to only one version of the poem, one of the few scattered printings before *CPW*, would receive different impressions of Byron’s emphasis depending on the version. Some<sup>31</sup> are more vulnerable texts, emphasizing the child role of a speaker who is “ashamed of [his] weakness.” In others,<sup>32</sup> the speaker defensively stresses his mature empathy ruling him “though” he is in emotional pain, and his manly discipline “not [letting] a sigh . . . escape.” By providing both versions, *CPW* reminds us that Byron played not only the child but also the man.

Studying “To Ianthe” and “Go—triumph securely” has made me grateful for *CPW*, not only because it has changed my understanding of both poems, but because it put so much information at my fingertips that I began my research miles ahead of where I would have begun otherwise. And that experience is one I know many Byronists share.

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<sup>28</sup> “Go—triumph securely” lines 9–10, emphasis mine, in *MS. T*; cf. Brummel.

<sup>29</sup> “Go—triumph securely” line 7 in *Gazette*; cf. *MS. H*.

<sup>30</sup> “Go—triumph securely” line 9, emphasis mine, in *Gazette*; cf. *MS. H*.

<sup>31</sup> *MS. T* (MS) and Brummel (print).

<sup>32</sup> *Gazette* (print), *MS. H* (printed 20<sup>th</sup> century).

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