

BYRONIC
HEROES IN
NINETEENTH-
CENTURY
WOMEN'S
WRITING AND
SCREEN
ADAPTATION

SARAH
WOOTTON



Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation

Also by Sarah Wootton

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Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation

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For Toby

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Introduction

... my soul shall find
A language in these tears!
[...]
His grave is thick with voices
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Stanzas on the Death of
Lord Byron*, 1824)¹

His name is on the haunted shade,
His name is on the air;
We walk the forest's twilight glade,
And only he is there.
The ivy wandering o'er the wall,
The fountain falling musical,
Proclaim him everywhere,
The heart is full of him, and flings
Itself on all surrounding things.
(Letitia Landon [L.E.L.], *The Portrait of Lord Byron at
Newstead Abbey*, 1840)²

I

The Byronic hero is everywhere. From the autonomous assassin in recent instalments of the James Bond franchise to the stylish vampires that proliferate in popular fiction and on screen, this figure has captured the imagination of generations of readers and viewers.³ The first Byronic hero, and a blueprint for the rest, became an overnight sensation in March 1812, when Cantos I and II of Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's*

Pilgrimage were published and sold out within three days.⁴ Successive poems showcasing a spiritually isolated superman secured the literary fame and longevity of this Romantic poet and the legendary figure that bears his name. The Byronic hero remains, some 200 years after Byron became a bestselling poet, 'an unprecedented cultural phenomenon'.⁵ His presence persists, for instance, in the immensely successful *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* series, fantasy romances that reinscribe our fascination with a damaged and damaging anti-hero – a seductive outsider who is superior in suffering, sinfulness, subversions, and perversions – as encountered by an inexperienced, yet curious, young woman.⁶ That girlish innocence can triumph over manly experience through the redemptive power of love constitutes the staple ingredient in countless Regency romances and Mills and Boon novels. This gendered formula for fiction appears in the following 'tip sheet' for writing mass-market contemporary romance: 'The hero is 8 to 12 years older than the heroine. He is self-assured, masterful, hot-tempered, capable of violence, passion, and tenderness. He is often mysteriously moody. Heathcliff (*Wuthering Heights*) is a rougher version; Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*) is a more refined one'.⁷ The template is unmistakably Byronic, with the sardonic and self-deprecating humour of Byron's poetry edited out, and yet the Byronic hero has been dispersed to such a degree that he no longer needs to be named; he is, in fact, more readily identifiable through his notable nineteenth-century progeny.⁸ The genealogy of this cultural archetype has become congested – over-crowded even – with the Brontës' heroes and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* more familiar today than Byron's protagonists. But the archetype is no less recognisably Byronic for that.

It is beyond the scope of this book to give a comprehensive commentary on the descendants and permutations of this ubiquitous figure from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Although critics have ventured to provide a chapter or chapters in the history of the Byronic hero, no single study can cover what Mario Praz posited, in *The Romantic Agony*, as 'the innumerable Fatal Men who came into existence on the pattern of the Byronic hero'.⁹ That said, this book employs a broad interdisciplinary lens that extends from close readings of nineteenth-century poetry and prose to twentieth- and twenty-first century films and television series, whilst also remaining attentive to intertextual issues of gender and genre, creative medium, and cultural contexts. *Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation* considers authors for whom the reception of Byron's poetry and the cult of Byronicism were pressing concerns; it also considers the

reconfiguration of the Byronic in recent screen adaptations. Tracing Byronic legacies in the fiction of major nineteenth-century women writers – including Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot – and examining the resurgence of Byronic heroes in film and television versions of their work are the main subjects of this book. The rationale for the focus of this book, on women writers and on the specific women writers selected, is discussed in detail below. In short, it is my contention that the charged, unstable, and instructive dialogues between Austen, Gaskell, Eliot, and a Byronic inheritance have not received the sustained scholarly attention they deserve. A further factor in determining the focus of this book is the cultural legacy of these literary encounters, specifically in terms of screen adaptations, which has yet to be explored.

Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation charts a new chapter in the changing fortunes of the Byronic hero and his afterlives. This is the first book to examine the legacy of a Romantic icon through the work of nineteenth-century women writers and screen adaptations of their fiction. I hope to establish previously overlooked crosscurrents between Byron's poetry, his posthumous reputation, and prose writers – from Austen to Eliot – whose novels have inspired successive screen adaptations. As such, this book will offer a timely reassessment of Byron's reception and cultural reach during the nineteenth century and beyond, some two centuries after the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812. It will also offer fresh readings of seminal nineteenth-century works as well as a broader and more diverse context of literary dialogues and artistic afterlives in which to situate these writers. *Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation* departs from previous scholarship that regards the Byronic hero as a redundant, repressive, or static figure by arguing for indeterminacy and malleability as preconditions of his prolonged afterlife. The writers and adapters considered in this book are not recycling a stereotype or commenting on the cult of Byronism from the sidelines; they are renegotiating and renewing the Byronic by also engaging with the subtler shades, tones, and forms of Byron's poetry.

Questions that underpin the subsequent discussion include, but are not limited to, the following: what can the work of nineteenth-century women writers, many of whom professed an aversion to Byron, tell us about the appeal and function of the Byronic hero as a cultural phenomenon? Conversely, what does the treatment of Byron and Byronism by these women writers tell us about their attitude, often

divided, towards a persistent male Romantic presence? How does Byron's poetry fare in women's prose of the period and with what effect on how we read both his and their work? In what ways does this incursion of poetry and 'poetic' protagonists into predominantly realist prose speak to the gendered dialogue over genre that extends from Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) to Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1866) and Eliot's verse dramas, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) and *Armgart* (1871)? What role does Byron's poetry and the figure of the Byronic hero play in the reconfiguration of literary masculinities in screen versions of Austen's, Gaskell's, and Eliot's fiction? And, finally, what features of Byron's poetry induce such generic hybridity and enable such mobility of meaning?

Another woman novelist who enters these debates, sometime after Austen, Gaskell, and Eliot, is Virginia Woolf. Woolf's modernist writings, although outside the remit of this book, extend the conflicted commentaries on Byron, the Byronic, and related issues of gender and genre beyond the nineteenth century. The Romantic poet and his legacy proved to be a disruptive presence in her work, wrong-footing misreaders in an early novel, *Night and Day* (1919), and informing the figure of the male misfit in *Jacob's Room* (1922) and the later *avant-garde* novel, *The Waves* (1931). Byron remains a literary touchstone for Woolf in her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), and her continuing dialogue with the poet is the subject of 'Byron and Mr Briggs', an unfinished draft introduction for what would become *The Common Reader* (1925). 'Byron and Mr Briggs' demonstrates how vital a source of inspiration Byron was, especially the poet's letters, for her thinking on reading, reception, and criticism. Woolf's appreciation of the 'prose' Byron is attuned to what is 'very changeable' in his writing even as she tries to 'To make a whole' out of his and her own discordant voices.¹⁰ As such, Woolf gravitates towards the vigour and 'elastic shape' of *Don Juan*, a poem to which George Eliot also returned on a number of occasions. This masterpiece, Woolf rhapsodised, 'showed how flexible an instrument poetry might become' (*Essays of Virginia Woolf*, IV, p. 434). With *The Waves*, as it opens out into the hinterlands between poetry and prose, Woolf 'followed his example to put this tool to further use', capturing a lyricism that rises above the 'character' of Byron that Bernard adopts. It is the Byron that, for Woolf, might have been a novelist, which drew her to him in spite of what she considered to be the vulgar Byronic personality. Likewise, it is the Byron of narrative agility and robust ideas, the Byron who experimented with genre and form, which proved so adaptable to the women novelists that came before her.

II

Frances Wilson states that Byron and the myth surrounding his life and work 'hypnotised his own generation and dominated the next [...]. Byron lent his name to the scornful, despairing, and burdened hero of nineteenth-century literature'.¹¹ Wilson is rearticulating Peter L. Thorslev's earlier pronouncement that 'the most popular phenomenon of the English Romantic Movement and the figure with the most far-reaching consequences for nineteenth-century Western literature was the Byronic Hero'.¹² Thorslev's landmark study traces the genesis of the Byronic hero from prototypes in the eighteenth century, such as the Gothic villain, to earlier incarnations, such as Satan and Prometheus, arguing that 'all the elements of the Byronic Hero existed before him in the literature of the age. This hero is unique, in one sense, in the powerful fusion of these disparate elements into a single commanding image' (*Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, p. 12). In other words, Byron's protagonists were forged out of pre-existing hero figures; he skilfully, and with no little poetic flair, selected the sympathetic, and alluring, aspects of the villain to combine with the heroic traits that appealed most to the readers of the age. The poet's unparalleled success was the result of a considered recalibration of the hero-villain as lover. And yet, according to Thorslev, the reign of the Byronic hero began to wane in the Victorian period and was ultimately eclipsed by the advent of modernism. The defamiliarising effects of the early twentieth century – modern warfare in particular – shifted an emphasis in literature from immense passions, pride, and self-possession to suffering and emasculation. For Thorslev, as for Praz, in his study *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, the cult of the common man prevailed over the cult of the hero.¹³

There is much value in contextualising the hero historically and rooting models of masculinity within specific social and cultural changes. This book will be guided by such an approach when considering the figure of the Byronic hero over a time span of 200 years – more specifically, within the literature of the later Romantic period, the mid and high Victorian periods, and, latterly, screen adaptations inspired by that literature and produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is, however, my contention that Thorslev was premature in pronouncing the death of the Byronic hero.¹⁴ The Byronic categories he identified (which include the interrelated figures of the Child of Nature, the Gloomy Egoist, the Hero of Sensibility, the Man of Feeling, the Noble Outlaw etc.) ultimately prove limiting when thinking of modern manifestations of the phenomenon in which 'angst-ridden individuals try to

free themselves from an overpowering and entrapping sense of self'.¹⁵ In this book, I intend to move away from deterministic hero 'types' to consider the mutability as well as the persistence of Byronic heroes. Indeed, while I focus on the Byronic heroes that distinguish screen adaptations of nineteenth-century novels, this figure has also attained a certain kudos in contemporary fan fiction, popular music, cult movies, and television series. That 'Byronic heroes are still hot popular culture commodities' at the start of the twenty-first century is proof, for Atara Stein, that the Romantic period never ended.¹⁶ Audiences today are as drawn to the romance of the outlaw as they were in the nineteenth century, vicariously experiencing a powerful autonomy before reaffirming a shared humanity. Although underlying cultural patterns and trends such as these are worthy of note and supply a useful backdrop for the subsequent discussion, my approach to the Byronic hero is governed by an attention to individual works of fiction and to the particularities of form, medium, and period. Close analysis of both poetry and prose, and the involved transactions between genre, affords insights into Romantic dialogues and legacies that a consideration of cultural and historical context alone is unable to achieve.

III

Criticism, with the exception of Stein and a few notable others, has tended to focus on the reception of Byron in the nineteenth century. Much of that criticism has centred on male writers. A Byronic presence has been discussed in the novels of Thomas Love Peacock, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope, among others.¹⁷ These authors were drawn to and deflated a gloomily romantic Byron. For Elfenbein, in his invaluable study *Byron and the Victorians*, the 'development away from a youthful, immature Byronic phrase to a sober, adult "Victorian" phase became one of the nineteenth-century's master narratives, the *Bildungsroman* of the Victorian author' (p. 89, original emphasis). Elfenbein's 'master narrative' of Romantic infatuation tempered by Victorian stoicism is told through the self-fashioning of male writers, including Carlyle and Tennyson, and the dandified exponents of the silver-fork novel, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Benjamin Disraeli. Elfenbein devotes one chapter to a woman writer, Emily Brontë, whose position as a post-Romantic 'voice from the margins' exemplifies her anomalous status.¹⁸ The marginalisation of women writers within a prevailing schema that the Victorians outgrew the Romantics, particularly Byron, is not confined to studies of British writers. Further afield,

the impact of Byron and his heroes on Russian writers, such as Mikhail Lermontov and Alexander Pushkin, has been explored, and his transatlantic influence has been traced through writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁹ Scholars have identified many of the major (and indeed minor) voices in the construction of a Victorian Byron and detailed his substantial presence within European Romanticism. Studies have often excluded or minimised the importance of women writers, however. Significant chapters in the story of Byron's afterlives have been abridged or occluded.²⁰

Research has begun to explore the interplay between women writers, Byron, and a Byronic inheritance, even if important questions remain unanswered. Recent scholarship has moved away from a discourse of incompatibility on the basis of gender to a reassessment of creative partnerings in the context of a wider project to reconnect male and female writers of the Romantic period.²¹ A number of female Romantics have been considered in this regard: consummate Byronists, such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (L.E.L.), whose poems were often mistaken for those of Byron, and prose writers who penetrated and parodied the Byronic protagonist, such as Mary Shelley and Lady Caroline Lamb.²² The 'strange feelings' of adulation and aversion articulated in Landon's 'Stanzas, Written beneath the Portrait of Lord Byron, painted by Mr. West', which appeared in the *Literary Souvenir* of 1827, can be seen as indicative of the antithetical struggle between women writers and a Byronic Romanticism.²³ And yet the uncertain reflections mediated through this portrait by William West recede when recalling the subject's elevation to the 'glorious' dead (l. 75). It is Byron's selfless sacrifice, dying in the Greek War of Independence, that deflects attention away from a charged ekphrastic response to West's portrait and refocuses attention on a deeper Byron residing beneath a stunning surface. It is Landon's renewed enthrallment with and return to the Byronic fold that launches her audacious plea for emancipation: 'Oh, England! to thy young and brave/ Is not this stirring call,/ To free the fallen from the chain,/ To break the tyrant's thrall' (ll. 79–82). For Landon, as for women writing later in the nineteenth century, Byron's heartfelt humanitarianism is communicated through a lament at once deeply affecting and politically charged.

What Caroline Franklin argues for Victorian female novelists – that 'the Romantic movement as a whole unleash[ed ...] creative energies and larger ambitions[, and] Byron in particular engaged them in transnational issues of political, racial and sexual freedom' – is pertinent to a

Victorian female poet whose roots were firmly in the Romantic period.²⁴ Byron served as a springboard for the political and proto-feminist tenor of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, which gained momentum and strength in her experimental 'novel-poem', *Aurora Leigh* (1856).²⁵ From the grave that Barrett Browning envisages as 'thick with voices' in her early poem of 1824, *Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron*, women writers spanning the nineteenth century found a language of defiance and liberation in Byron, adding their respective voices to an energised song in sorrow that speaks with a revolutionary's zeal (l. 34). His 'startling chords', a conduit of freedom and feeling with 'sweet' and 'salt' aftertaste, appealed not only to the avowed acolyte, EBB, but to fellow female authors who troubled the boundaries between the Romantic and Victorian periods (*Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron*, l. 27).²⁶

Fellow Romantic Victorians, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, have long been considered Byronic heirs. These sisters ingrained the imprint of the Byronic hero into our collective cultural memory. The literary fate and fortunes of the Byronic hero became bound up with two novels published in 1847, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. The heroes of these widely read works, Mr Rochester and Heathcliff, have become bywords for the Byronic. The women writers featured in this book engaged extensively and intensively with Byron's poetry and Byronism, but none come close to Charlotte and Emily Brontë in propagating the 'myth' of the Byronic hero and ensuring a widespread and durable dissemination. The impact of Byron on the Brontës' fiction has been well documented.²⁷ Still, although it would not be appropriate to consider their work (and the many adaptations of it) in a book that examines creatively divided responses to the cult of Byronism, their revisionist readings of Byron and his heroes should be noted if only in brief. The uncritical conflation of the Brontës with the Byronic, which has rendered their hero figures synonymous, denies the depth and nuance of a mutually illuminating literary relationship. It is the Brontës' investment in Byron and the profundity of Byron's influence on them that inhibits imitation.²⁸

In her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anne Brontë strips away an initial thrill of Byronic glamour to reveal a corrupt and corrupting charm. Arthur Huntingdon outdoes the other spoilt and sordid examples of aristocratic men in Brontë's novel with his grasping and hollow libertinism. Anne's explicit realism and commitment to a moral 'truth' resists the lure of a dark Romanticism and demystifies the cynical cruelty of her sisters' Byronic heroes to devastating effect.²⁹ Yet neither Charlotte nor Emily could be said to condone hero-worship. Indeed,

their male protagonists, more Byronic in many regards than Byron or his poetic creations, denigrate what they regard as a formulaic or 'feminised' Byronism that seeks to domesticate romantic passions. The 'coily self-referential' regard for the Byronic hero that Stein detects in popular television series and comic books can be traced back to the Brontës as well as to their wryly self-critical precursor, Byron ('Byronic Heroes in Popular Culture', p. 8). When, in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff sneers at his wife's 'fabulous notion of my character', he distances himself from her misapprehensions.³⁰ In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester laments the staleness of his story:

'I am a trite common-place sinner; hackneyed in all the poor petty dissipations with which the rich and worthless try to put on life. [...] I had not, it seems, the originality to chalk out a new road to shame and destruction, but trode the old track with stupid exactness not to deviate an inch from the beaten centre.'³¹

Both Isabella Linton and Blanche Ingram are quixotic readers conversant with Byronic 'types'. The former 'pictur[es] in [Heathcliff] a hero of romance' (p. 187), with horrifying consequences, while the latter 'doat[s] on Corsairs', and casts Rochester as a 'gallant gentleman-highwayman' and an 'Italian bandit' (pp. 200, 205). Where Blanche's fashionable and disingenuous flirtations fail to secure a wealthy husband – as she is outmanoeuvred by Rochester's more calculating dissimulations – Isabella's abusive marriage deflates her fiction-fuelled fantasies and forestalls a false impression of Heathcliff as a 'star-cross'd' husband. Rochester and Heathcliff re-ignite a myth of heroic romance as they contest the 'romantic' attribution they now personify. The irony that underscores this iconic status brings the Brontës even closer to exemplifying the Byronic, as they share the poet's 'ambivalence toward the very Romantic ideals his hero espouses'.³² Although the Brontëan marriage of minds with the Byronic (however troubled) prevents their inclusion in this study, their respective rewritings of Byron's poetry and the Byronic persona direct the reader to the ways in which the poet probed and parodied his own incarnations of the dangerously destructive self. In other words, an authentic imaginative affinity with Byron compels critical engagement and necessitates a degree of critical distance.

The women writers dealt with in this book have not, in contrast to the Brontë sisters, featured prominently in the cultural history of Byronism. In fact, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot are invariably cited as expressing anti-Byronic sentiments when they are cited at all.³³

Austen's arch comment, 'I have read the *Corsair*, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do', in a letter dated 5 March 1814, suggests an unengaged reader of the latest Byron bestseller.³⁴ Some half a century later, in a letter dated 23 August 1869, Eliot's declaration, 'Byron and his poetry have become more and more repugnant to me of late years', makes for a stronger disavowal.³⁵ Although Gaskell was not outspoken about the poet in her letters, direct references to Byron in her short stories and novels do not readily speak of a high regard. The tone of these comments is often taken as a measure of the Byronic male's defects when seen from the perspective of the nineteenth-century female author. It should be remembered, however, as individual chapters will take up and examine in detail, that such flaws are often associated with the misreading of Byron. Shortcomings are not so much levelled at Byron's poetry, but at Byronism, a fashion for the 'theatrical' Byron that Matthew Arnold held responsible for a blunted appreciation of the poet and his work.³⁶ Allusions to Byron by Austen, Eliot, and Gaskell are often quoted out of context (as Arnold's considered estimate of Byron is invariably misrepresented), curtailing discussions of this poet's influence on their creative development as writers.³⁷ Michael O'Neill's comment, that 'Arnold's responses to Byron and the Romantics double and divide themselves', not only redirects our attention to Arnold's discerning regard for Byron; it is pertinent to the reception of Byron by the authors considered in this book.³⁸

The alleged denigration of Byron by these women writers is interesting in itself. Austen read *The Corsair* (1814) shortly after publication, 'identifying herself as part of [a] community of readers' whose demand for Byron's poem sent it through multiple editions in a matter of weeks.³⁹ In her last complete novel, *Persuasion* (1818), Byron and Scott are hailed as the 'first-rate poets' of the age, registering the phenomenal impact of their respective writings and fame.⁴⁰ Austen's *Persuasion* is attuned to an audience for whom poetry was a common topic of conversation. The autumnal lyricism of her late prose is a tribute, a 'twilight-piece', to the Romantic poet and the popularity of Romantic poetry among the reading public from a prose writer who sought to defend the novel as a genre.⁴¹ In similar ways, both Eliot and Gaskell read Byron's poetry over sustained periods and were drawn to the cultural commentaries on this unique literary figure. Byron was an early favourite with Eliot and she remained preoccupied with his Romantic individualism throughout her writing life. A central tenet of my argument, and a determining factor in the authors selected for discussion in this book, is that Austen, Eliot, and Gaskell are engaged in a 'double'

discourse about Byron that discerns creative value in the poetry and castigates the public profile. The cult of Byronism is critiqued through characters who perform a Byronic pose, without reading the poetry, or those who read the poetry through the personae, seeking only sensationalism or to affect an appearance of cultured taste. The scandal surrounding Byron and his sexual misadventures remains close to the surface of the text as a sophisticated reading of his poetry takes hold at a deeper level. A number of the novels that will be examined in this book feature a heroine that graduates from female fandom – a concern with style over substance – to the cultivated habits of a discerning reader.

IV

The Byronic hero's continuing cultural currency derives from conflicted characters born out of writing that contests generic boundaries. As Jonathan Gross notes, in relation to Byron's 'plays' – *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem* (1817), *Sardanapalus: A Tragedy* (1821), and *The Deformed Transformed: A Drama* (1824) among them – 'it is remarkable how many metamorphoses Byron's hero undergoes'.⁴² His evolution out of experiments with dramatic verse and narrative poems goes some way to explain his amenability to appearing in other literary forms and cultural media. The Byronic hero was, in his origins and development, and continues to be, a generic shape-shifter. Prevailing features of this poetic figure in the prose and screen adaptations examined in this book are mobility and growth. For instance, in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Will Ladislaw is described as 'pliable' with a 'flexible' mind.⁴³ Common to all the heroes under consideration in this book is their ability to promote change, personally and politically, acting as catalysts for the heroine's physical and psychological growth. As Jane Eyre 'gathered flesh and strength' (p. 163) after the arrival of Rochester at Thornfield Hall, and the heroine, in turn, offers a 'new road' for the hero, with revitalised prospects, so Dorothea Brooke is rejuvenated by Ladislaw's potency – 'her face brightening and her head becoming a little more erect on its beautiful stem' (p. 664) – and he is absorbed in and stimulated by her presence: 'Each looked at the other as if they had been two flowers which had opened then and there' (p. 299). One of the main attractions of the Byronic hero for a writer like Eliot is his potential for renewal, 'the surprising pliability and mutability of that apparently one-dimensional, posturing creature' (Lansdown, 'Byronic Hero and the Victorian Heroine', p. 114).