

The Byronic Heroine and Byron's *The Corsair*

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THE phrase, "the Byronic heroine," usually evokes an image which is epitomized by a sketch executed for Byron's *Corsair* by Richard Westall, a contemporary painter famous for his mannered book illustrations.¹ Westall's watercolor shows a tall, tragic-stricken young woman in Oriental dress — including billowy pants, a long camisole tunic, and a trailing, embroidered train — leaning forlornly against the outer wall of a vine-covered, Mediterranean cottage which is perched high on a rocky promontory overlooking the sea. Her hair straggles untended down her face, shoulder, and back; her figure is stooped; and her hands hang listlessly. She has turned from a departing ship which is disappearing into the distance, while the vast lonely horizon further accentuates her grief.

This character represents Haidée and the women of the narrative tales which Byron produced in 1813-14, and is usually considered to be "the Byronic heroine." More importantly, she is the figure so designated by Byron himself. Despite the excellence of some of his other female characters (for example, Aurora Raby in *Don Juan* and Myrrha in *Sardanapalus*), whenever he mentioned his "heroines," Byron catalogued only Leila from *The Giaour*, Zuleika from *The Bride of Abydos*, Gulnare and Medora from *The Corsair*, and Haidée (who will not be considered here). Unlike the Byronic hero, who has been the subject of much deliberation, the Byronic heroine has not received the primary attention which she deserves. Generally, she is not as compelling a figure as the hero (though this is not always true in individual cases) nor is she as central in English

and European literary history. Nevertheless, these Byronic heroines are important and should be more carefully studied for the following reasons: they are fascinating and worthwhile in themselves, especially since they were drawn by the author who created the most notorious and influential English hero type; they are important for the additional insights which they give into the nature and use of the Byronic hero; they show some of the larger trends of Romanticism — for instance, the romantic dichotomy of light-dark characterizations seen in Radcliffe's and Scott's novels; and they document a stage in Byron's growth as a poet and reveal a facet of his personal character.

In 1823, the last year of his life, Byron explained these female characters to his friend, Lady Blessington:

I flatter myself that my Leila, Zuleika, Gulnare, Medora, and Haidée will always vouch for my taste in beauty: these are the bright creations of my fancy, with rounded forms, and delicacy of limbs, nearly so incompatible as to be rarely, if, ever, united; . . . so that I am obliged to have recourse to imagination for my beauties, and there I always find them. . . . I should leave [my mistress] . . . to dress her up in the habiliments of my ideal beauty, investing her with all the charms of the latter, and then adoring the idol I had formed.²

And in a conversation that same year with Thomas Medwin, he added:

My writings, indeed, tend to exalt the sex; and my imagination has always delighted in giving them a *beau idéal* likeness, but I only drew them as a painter or statuary would do, — as they should be. Perhaps my prejudices, and keeping them at a distance, contributed to prevent the illusion from altogether being worn out and destroyed as to their celestialities.³

In both of these statements, Byron outlines a method of characterization which is essentially non-realistic. He stresses the distinction between life and art and emphasizes the role of the idealizing imagination. Therefore what he says here shows his bias toward ideally-depicted women and further suggests that, in his art, this was the conscious level from which he worked. While this definition of his creative process falsifies some of Byron's other female

characters and fails to tell the whole story about these five women, it does indicate the attitude which dominated the creation of "the Byronic heroine." No doubt, his poetic medium (which sanctioned romantic characterizations) and the fact that all of the women are non-English (and therefore exempt from the low opinion which he held of his countrywomen) helped him in projecting his beautiful ideals.

Though these heroines have traits which distinguish them as individuals, they share many common characteristics. They are all Eastern, young, and beautiful. They are fond of music, poetry, and romantic tales, and are often skilled in singing and playing. Refined and noble, these heroines seem to be highborn even when they have become harem slaves (as two of them are). In a sense, they are all orphans, alone with no close family or friends. Consequently, they are sequestered and are wont to live in spiritual and emotional solitude, their only meaningful contact being with the hero.

This hero is the object of their attention, passion, and eternal devotion, and they love him above all else. Even though they are usually quiet, mild, obedient and retiring, they can become vocal in expressing their love and exhibit strength and courage in its pursuit and defence. The Byronic heroines are essentially pure in soul and spirit despite their worldly crimes (like murder) and moral transgressions (like perfidy to their tyrant lords) — presumably because these "sins" are committed for the sake of a supra-human passion. All of these qualities make them eminently worthy of the hero's love, and they, in turn, provide his sole inspiration toward all that is good and human. Yet the heroines lead melancholy, troubled lives and end tragically. All of them die, three of broken hearts and one by being drowned for her infidelity.

This woman character is of the utmost importance to the purposes and effect of Byron's Oriental tales, and is one of the elements which justify T. S. Eliot's judgment of these *contes* as "readable . . . well-told . . . interesting."⁴

Though these heroines are conceived within certain limits, if one does not misconstrue the limits as automatic artistic flaws and ignore the variety and excellence of their depiction within them, then they can be rightly appreciated as one broad type functioning in many ways. They provide the central plot motivation, and much of the narrative interest, thematic meaning, and poetic symbolism.

Of all the tales, *The Corsair* (written in 1814) is the one which best illustrates the complex role of the Byronic heroine. Leila does not actually appear in *The Giaour* and therefore remains a shadowy figure. Zuleika, Byron's first deliberate attempt at a heroine, is a full representation of her type — but what Byron does with her he achieves also with Medora. And Kaled in *Lara* principally derives her significance from her earlier characterization as Gulnare. Thus the two women of *The Corsair*, Medora and Gulnare, show what Byron is able to accomplish with the Byronic heroine during this phase of his career. The poem also boasts an exciting romantic plot and a towering Byronic hero.

Conrad, the Corsair, is the leader of a pirate band that returns to his island hideaway and immediately prepares for a raid on Seyd Pasha, his enemy. He takes a tearful farewell of Medora, the woman he loves, despite her beguiling attempts to dissuade him. The foray is all but successful until Conrad is moved by the frightened cries of Seyd's women and pauses in the fight to rescue them from the burning castle. Seyd's forces rally, and Conrad is beaten and thrown into the tower prison. Falling in love with him, the harem queen, Gulnare, frees Conrad, and escapes with him to sea where they are joined by the happy remnant of his followers. Back to the island, Conrad discovers that Medora has died, and disappears mysteriously with Gulnare.

Medora and Gulnare share certain functions in the tale. They contribute to the action, convey the symbolic meaning of the poem, and help to characterize the hero by allowing

him to reveal aspects of himself which would otherwise remain hidden. Peter L. Thorslev points out an important instance of this last function in his discussion of women and their relationship with the Gothic villain, who was a prototype of the Noble Outlaw, Conrad. All of the villains were crass misogynists who delighted in feminine persecution. But,

according to the sentiments of the age, of course, any act of cruelty or even of unkindness and disrespect for women was unforgivable; . . . and Byron and Scott take advantage of this fact when portraying their Noble Outlaws. Make your protagonist a Hero of Sensibility in his regard for women, and this characteristic alone will mitigate all of his other crimes, no matter how Gothic. . . . a Romantic love for his mistress and a courteous attitude toward women in general is the "one virtue" amidst a "thousand crimes" which makes Conrad . . . a character over whose death readers could weep.⁵

Further than this, it is a mistake to generalize about Medora and Gulnare together, for they are quite different. Their physical appearance provides the first and most obvious clue to their individualities. In making Medora blue-eyed and fair-tressed (468, 470)⁶ and Gulnare dark-eyed and auburn-haired (1008-09), Byron is drawing on the romance tradition of contrasting fair and dark heroines which was begun by Mrs. Radcliffe (whom he numbered among his favorite authors) and extensively used by later writers — Scott, for example. Eino Railo describes these two romantic heroines:

The first named type [the fair woman] breathes a fine femininity, a tender and sacrificial maternal spirit, fighting the battles of life with the weapons of resignation and tears, and bringing to love everything that is divine, passion excluded. The second type, [the dark woman] more spiritedly poetical, is represented in the independent and oppositional beauty, who feels deeply, demands freedom of movement and choice, and is not impervious to passion.⁷

Railo's distinction, which conveniently categorizes the two basic types of women in Byron's poetry, is first clearly manifested in Medora and Gulnare.

Medora's character is not difficult to determine. She is Conrad's beautiful young mistress functioning as a positive

love figure who softly expresses her adoration and concern for her roaming Corsair. She first appears in the metaphorical guise of a "Bird of Beauty" caged and singing a melancholy song high in the tower which suggests a prison atop Conrad's hill. She implores Conrad to end her agony by learning to share "the joys of peace" — if not for her, then for his own "far dearer life,/Which [now] flies from love and languishes for strife" (394-95).

Her gayer side emerges when she invites her lover to eat the fruit which she has carefully culled and dressed for him, to taste the sparkling sherbet, to watch her dance or sing, or to read Ariosto's tales. When he begins to leave, she becomes passionate, kissing and caressing him "in all the wildness of dishevelled charms" (471). He walks away, calling her "the dim and melancholy Star/Whose ray of Beauty reached him from afar" (511-12). In this way, Medora is identified with the beacon-fire which blazes in the tower to direct him home. By leaving her, the Corsair rejects what she represents; he goes off to war with his enemy — repudiating Love and Beauty for Hate and Death. Symbolically, then, Medora is probably the physical embodiment of Conrad's tender features and one of Byron's many counterpart figures.

But Gulnare is decidedly richer, more complex, and more engaging. Because she exhibits the typical characteristics of the Byronic heroine, she is representative of them and shows how these traits are incorporated into the tales. At the same time, she is given a more expanded and active role in the poem and made a more human and realistic character. Thus, she points toward fuller feminine characterizations in Byron's later poetry, and can therefore be viewed as a transitional figure in his artistic development. Furthermore, the way Byron handles her illuminates him as a man and simultaneously raises some worthwhile questions about the construction of the tales.

Within the symbolic framework of *The Corsair*, Gulnare's meaning is rather easily arrived at if one uses the sug-

gestions given by earlier tales and by Medora's role. In an important sense, she belongs to the world of strife for which Conrad abandoned Medora and represents that part of his being and experience. Thus she is, as Jerome J. McGann aptly puts it, "the proper image of Conrad's divided spiritual aims."⁸ The ambiguity of his situation is reflected in her, for not only is she a part of what separates him from Medora, but she in turn comes to embody love and salvation from even greater violence by Seyd — yet primarily through the kind of violence which was, in the first place, and continues to be, the undoing of love. Furthermore, as William Marshall suggests, she intensifies the Corsair's psychological and emotional problems since she "(a Woman, therefore a Love symbol) has brought Death to the Seyd."⁹ And in any reading of the poem which stresses the bisexuality of human spiritual nature, she is certainly crucial, uniting as she does elements from both sides and suggesting the *Doppelgänger* theme which plays throughout these tales.

In further describing Gulnare, one must employ concepts and qualities which do not even arise with the other woman. The contradictory aspects of her character emerge with her initial appearance in the poem. Conveyed to safety in Conrad's arms during the fighting, she is "the Harem queen — but still the slave of Seyd;" and these opposites, queen and slave, first define her. Accustomed to the haughty wooing of the pacha, she marvels at the courtesy shown her by her rescuer and becomes aware of what is due her, a female slave, as a person. She becomes even more human and appealing by musing sarcastically about her rescue:

The wish is wrong—nay, worse for female—vain:
 Yet much I long to view that Chief again;
 If but to thank for, what my fear forgot,
 The life—my loving Lord remembered not! (875-78)

Gulnare's physical loveliness is emphasized as she appears late that same night in Conrad's cell, drawn there from sleeplessness at Seyd's side. This action gives the first

hint of her intrepidity. Gazing in wonder at Conrad as he calmly sleeps, she voices a dawning of romantic love: "What sudden spell hath made this man so dear?" (1030). She immediately begins to rationalize it in terms of gratitude, then attempts to dismiss it with "'Tis late to think," and finally confesses to Conrad when he awakes: "I came through darkness — and I scarce know why—/ Yet not to hurt — I would not see thee die" (1045-46).

In their ensuing conversation, Gulnare reveals her intelligence, initiative, pride, and strength. She promises to use her beguiling power with the Pacha to delay Conrad's impalement so that they can save him. When the Corsair despondently reflects on his situation and recalls Medora in a panegyric to their love, he yet shows his susceptibility to Gulnare's beauty: Until her form appeared, his "eyes ne'er asked if others were as fair [as Medora]" (1096). Gulnare, apparently affected by his declaration of love for another woman, gives a psychologically revealing response: "Thou lov'st another then?—but what to me/Is this?—'tis nothing—nothing n'er can be" (1097-98). And then she tells him how she envies those who love without the sighing after visions which besets her. She cannot, despite her striving, love "stern" Seyd, for, as she hesitatingly puts it, "I felt—I feel—Love dwells with—with the free" (1008).

After Gulnare leaves the Corsair, she employs her charm and cunning with the Pacha to try to save him. When these fail, she becomes increasingly resourceful and active. The escape scene enacted when she tremulously returns to Conrad at midnight is masterful. After hearing her affirm his sentence of death, he persists in a strange lassitude. Gulnare exhorts him: "If thou hast courage still, and would'st be free,/Receive this poinard—rise and follow me!" (1474-75). Still he hesitates, worrying about the clanking of his chains and the unsuitability of his garments for flight. She assures him that she has safely engineered the escape, and explains the motivation for her actions in a forty-five-line speech (1480-1525). In it Gulnare decrees the Pacha's

death because he prematurely accused her of infidelity. Though a slave, she refuses to be threatened and then spared simply to be "a toy for dotard's play/To wear but till the gilding frets away" (1510-11). The fire in her "Eastern heart" has only now been kindled, for her love of Conrad and hatred of Seyd are the first strong emotions she has felt.

After the Corsair refuses to knife a sleeping man and advises her to be peaceful, Gulnare decides herself to kill Seyd and springs to do so as the fettered Conrad trails behind. With wild eyes and streaming hair, she returns, and a spot of blood on her brow proclaims the murder. If he had shuddered at her passion before, Conrad is now thoroughly revulsed. Still in command while Conrad "following, at her beck, obeyed," she leads them aboard ship and they embark. Lost in contemplation, Conrad reviews the past and dreams of "his lonely bride" until the reality of "Gulnare, the Homicide," kneeling beside him and watching his "freezing aspect and averted air," compels his attention. The "strange fierceness foreign to her eye" has now disappeared in tears:

"Thou may'st forgive though Allah's self detest;
But for that deed of darkness what wert thou?
Reproach me—but not yet—Oh! spare me now!
I am not what I seem—this fearful night
My brain bewildered—do not madden quite!
If I had never loved — though less my guilt—
Thou hadst not lived to—hate me—if thou wilt." (1637-43)

The change in her becomes even more pronounced when they join Conrad's men who so perplex her by their stares that she turns to him her — "faint imploring eye," "drops her veil," and stands silently. If she or Conrad had revealed how they escaped, the pirates would certainly have made her their queen. But they both scruple to have it known that he was rescued by a woman. Moved by her meekness and the knowledge of all she has done for him, Conrad embraces and kisses her. Had it not been for the "bodings of his breast" about Medora, "his latest virtue then had

joined the rest" (1715-16). But he remains faithful, and Gulnare fades out of the conclusion of the poem.

Throughout, Gulnare manipulates the action in such a way that she becomes the one person with whom the Corsair *must* reckon. She compels him to respond — in admiration for her beauty, in horror at her violent love and "desecration of feminine gentleness," and in unbidden affection for her devotion. That self-containment on which he prided himself is shattered by the force of her individuality. In the escape scene, Conrad's inaction and revulsion are inconsistent with his expressed atheism (1083-84) and his reputation as a fearless outlaw. This lapse in his characterization is Byron's way of dramatizing the complete metamorphosis of Gulnare's personality and the horrible perversion of the "natural" scheme of things which has resulted in their both being "unsexed," Byron's symbol in these tales for a world which is out of joint.

Gulnare's change of character deserves even further comment. At the point where she confesses her love to Conrad, she launches into an accurate comparison of herself and Medora:

Though fond as mine her bosom, form more fair
 I rush through peril which she would not dare.
 If that thy heart to hers were truly dear,
 Where I thine own—thou wert not lonely here:
 An outlaw's spouse—and leave her Lord to roam!
 What hath such gentle dame to do with home? (1466-71)

Interesting first for its characterization of Gulnare, this speech is doubly valuable because it raises some artistic questions about the Byronic hero and heroine. In the tradition which produced them, there were a dark and a light hero as well as the contrasting heroines mentioned earlier.¹⁰ The fair young types were generally linked together in a happy fate while their dark counterparts suffered tragedy. Byron merged the two kinds of heroes by taking over most of the characteristics of the dark one and some gentler elements of the light. The women, too, he merged, but in opposite proportions, appropriating more features from the

fair heroine. Ordinarily, he used the resulting figure by herself in each poem. But here in *The Corsair*, the two feminine representations appear, and Byron tentatively feels his way (one might even say he stumbles among this new material).

He first pairs his towering hero with a woman unlike him in command and power, and then with a parallel heroine drawn on a scale equal to his own. After having painted this bold portrait of a dark heroine, he tones down the colors and makes her, at the end, a light type in all but her appearance; and he even creates the impression that her looks, too, have faded: She "now seemed changed and humbled, *faint* and meek,/ But varying oft the colour of her cheek/ To deeper shades of *paleness*" (1701-03), my italics). Thus, he recaptures the contrast between the hero and heroine which was present in the first instance. His retreat from his headier creation back to the safer delineation of the one-dimensional woman and simpler Byronic heroine represents a capitulation to the orthodoxy of his genre and society, and also to his own ambiguous feelings about bold, strongly individualistic women. Considered from the point of view of his artistry, Byron's treatment of Conrad and Gulnare suggests that he did not wish to wrestle with two heroic figures in the same story, especially since handling them would not have greatly changed the outlines of his poem. He apparently felt that there was room enough for only one such character and made certain that nothing would detract from his male hero.

All of the female characters in Byron's Oriental tales are not as striking as Gulnare. Yet, as a group, they deserve recognition — especially when their socio-literary contexts are considered. These larger frameworks provide extensive avenues for further investigation which can only be suggested here.

Obviously, one fruitful approach is to compare them with the other women characters in Byron's poetry. When this is done, they emerge as deliberately balanced counter-

parts to his Byronic heroes who, together with these heroes, represent Byron's achievement in the romantic verse narrative on which he focused during this period of his artistic life. Furthermore, Byron's experimentation with these heroines was apprentice work for his more fully-developed women. Haidée, for instance, is the culmination of the artistic impulse which produced her sisters in these earlier tales, while anticipations of Myrrha can be seen in Gulnare.

When the Byronic heroine is placed against the background of Regency England, she stands out as a reflection of the proscribed — and primarily emotional — roles which that society accorded to its women. Ironically, Byron's depiction helped to perpetuate the stereotyped prevailing image which had first influenced him. He was also probably thinking of the numerous women in his audience when he laced his verse with chivalrous romanticism.

From the viewpoint of the literary historian, the Byronic heroine can be compared with other romantic female figures (Shakespeare's, for example, or the heroines of Gothic romances and verse narratives). She could be placed within the tradition of the *femme fatale* (where she does not strictly fit, even though some ambiguity attaches to her as a love figure since she is sometimes the indirect cause of the hero's death). And finally, she might fruitfully be related to the symbolic use of women by other Romantic authors (Shelley, for instance). Certainly, the Byronic heroine is a rich figure, and she becomes even richer when one fully realizes her intrinsic value and larger significance.

NOTES

¹This painting is the frontispiece to George Paston (pseudonym of Emily Morse Symonds) and Peter Quennell, "*To Lord Byron*": *Feminine Profiles based upon unpublished letters 1807-1824* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939). Murray published Westall's illustrations of Byron's poems in 1819.

²*Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 96-97.

³*Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 73.

- ⁴T. S. Eliot, "Byron' 'in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 199.
- ⁵Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 55.
- ⁶The edition of *The Corsair* used is *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1905). Line numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.
- ⁷Eino Railo, *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1927), p. 291.
- ⁸Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 190.
- ⁹William H. Marshall, *The Structures of Byron's Major Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), p. 50.
- ¹⁰This information was also gleaned from Railo, *passim*.

Shifting Into High

for so long i was shuddering
 in neutral revving up a cold
 motor watching the morning
 through my breath fogged glass
 and then i set off into line

truly then we were lifted up
 space was taken and we traversed
 together moving serene inside
 our metal through the morning

now staring at our moving
 we search for and hold our
 place moving still together
 yet alone we are shifting
 into high

Eugene McNamara