

# The Shakespearean Sublime and the Reception of Byron's Writing

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Article abstract

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## THE SHAKESPEAREAN SUBLIME AND THE RECEPTION OF BYRON'S WRITING<sup>1</sup>

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### **Résumé**

Cet article explore la possibilité que la nouvelle critique de Shakespeare, survenue vers la fin du dix-huitième siècle, ait pu aider à définir un sublime anglais qui conditionnait la réception de l'œuvre de Byron et la perception de Byron dans un sens plus large. Au cours du dix-huitième siècle, ces mêmes caractéristiques qui avaient été classées par les critiques comme des défauts chez Shakespeare (emploi de superstitions primitives, rudesse, inégalités, digressions, contrastes abrupts) devinrent peu à peu admirées comme étant la preuve de la fidélité de Shakespeare à la nature, de sa pénétration psychologique et de son imaginaire sublime. Divergeant de l'association primaire par Edmund Burke du sublime et de la terreur, le sublime anglais de Shakespeare récupérait les défauts du climat anglais et montraient le potentiel moral et esthétique caché d'un mode déviant sublime. Suivant un aperçu des courants conflictuels de la critique de Shakespeare (axé surtout sur une discussion de *Antony and Cleopatra*), j'analyserai les moyens par lesquels les critiques contemporains de Byron (et Byron lui-même) adaptaient l'application du sublime shakespearien dans l'œuvre de Byron ou bien y résistaient.

No author, perhaps, ever existed, of whom opinion has been so various as *Shakespeare*. Endowed with all the sublimity, and subject to all the irregularities of genius, his advocates have room for unbounded praise, and their opponents for frequent blame. (Henry Mackenzie, 1780)

Mr. Frere is at length satisfied that you are the author of 'Beppo'. He had no conception that you possessed the protean talent of Shakespeare, thus to assume at will so different a character. (Murray to Byron, 1818)

This paper moves away from the sublime biblical prophecy explored by Ian Balfour and into a religion of a different kind. "With us islanders, *Shakespeare* is a kind of established religion in poetry," Arthur Murphy wrote in an essay addressed to Voltaire in 1753 (qtd. in Dobson 7). Shakespeare never used the word sublime and he was not always thought of as sublime but when he was (especially in the later eighteenth century) this paper suggests that his reception informs and to some extent conditions what happens to Byron's reception in the early nineteenth century.

One of the problems of defining the sublime in Shakespeare for eighteenth-century commentators is that it encompassed myriad aesthetic effects. Put very crudely, one group of critics sees the sublime as something which Shakespeare often attains and then leaves behind; and the other group sees it as the ability to embrace all modes, the idea of a luxuriant, exuberant, Protean genius. Both are applicable to Byron, but it is the latter possibility that forms the focus of this paper.

The Protean reception of Shakespeare is found throughout the late eighteenth century. In 1774, for example, Alexander Gerard celebrates "richness," "multiplicity," "luxuriance of invention" and sees Shakespeare as superior to Milton "in point of genius;" however, he warns, "That very exuberance of imagination which commands our admiration is sometimes indulged so far as necessarily to incur our censure" (qtd. in Vickers 6: 113-4). William Richardson (1774) notes that Shakespeare "is the Proteus

of the drama” (118-9). Thomas Warton (1781) describes Shakespeare’s versatility: “The glancings of his eye are from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven . . . In the same scene he descends from his meridian of the noblest tragic sublimity to puns and quibbles, to the meanest merriments of a plebeian farce . . . He seems not to have seen any impropriety in the most abrupt transitions, from dukes to buffoons . . . and from kings to clowns” (308). Edward Taylor (1774) also remarks on Shakespeare’s abrupt transitions:

It must be acknowledged that Shakespeare abounds in the true sublime; but it must be allowed that he abounds likewise in the low and vulgar. And who is there, that after soaring on eagle wings to unknown regions and empyreal heights, is not most sensibly mortified to be compelled the next moment to grovel in dirt and ordure? . . . What a contrast there is between the sublime and the bathos! Yet how closely are they united in Shakespeare! . . . How cruel it is . . . to hurry us from heroes and philosophers into a crew of plebeians, grave-diggers, and buffoons. (130)

Taylor’s concern about the contrast between “the sublime and the bathos” intersects with neoclassical objections to Shakespearean drama and with Johnson’s famous defence of Shakespeare’s mixture of comic and tragic scenes. Johnson’s preface (1765) states that “mingled drama” is truer to the “real state of sublunary nature . . . shewing how . . . the high and the low co-operate in the general system by unavoidable concatenation” (Raleigh 15-16). The “Grave-diggers themselves,” Johnson affirmed, “may be heard with applause” (18). But he was less sympathetic to digressive word play finding that Shakespeare “no sooner begins to move, than he counteracts himself; and terrour and pity, as they are rising in the mind, are checked and blasted by sudden frigidity” (23). When talking about the distraction of editorial notes, Johnson uses the same metaphor, “The mind is refrigerated by interruption” (62). We have to wait for the later eighteenth century before discontinuity is felt to offer psychological potential. This is perhaps best illustrated by Henry Mackenzie’s essays on *Hamlet* (1780):

No author, perhaps, ever existed of whom opinion has been so various as *Shakespeare*. Endowed with all the sublimity and subject to all the irregularities of genius, his advocates have room for unbounded praise, and their opponents for frequent blame . . . Of all the characters of *Shakespeare* that of *Hamlet* has been generally thought the most difficult to be reduced to any fixed or settled principle.<sup>2</sup>

The debate about Shakespeare's genius would have been part of the education, polite reading and periodical discussions of Byron's first audience. Shakespeare is invoked by nearly all Byron's contemporary reviewers at some stage in his career. Inevitably during the wars with France, the national bard became the yard stick by which the current state of national literature was judged. Shakespearean characteristics were, however, assigned to Byron in contradictory ways: Byron's persona in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or *Don Juan* was routinely described as Timon-like or Coriolanus-like or, lower down the scale, as contiguous with Thersites, Caliban or his "fellow grumblers" (*The Independent*, *The Investigator*, the *Scots Magazine*, the *London Magazine*, the *Christian Observer*). In 1821 in a review of *Sardanapalus* the *British Critic* lamented Byron's pernicious influence on English culture with the words, "the evil that men do lives after them" (Reiman 1: 313-14). A less portentous Shakespearean critique appeared in the "Letter to the Author of *Beppo*" in *Blackwood's* (1818):

You decked yourself in the sable trappings of a Hamlet, and, like him, you were free to confess that 'the earth seemed to you only a sterile promontory, and the goodly canopy of heaven a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. You had no pleasure in Man, no! nor, for all our smiling, in Woman neither'. ('Anglicanus' 327)

When reviewers wished to extol Byron's merits they also looked towards Shakespeare's tragic heroes. The *Examiner* saw Byron as Lear in *Manfred*

and Prospero in his creation of *The Island*; the *Manchester Iris* met *Cain* with “Oh what a noble mind is here overthrown” (Reiman 4: 1336).

More often, of course, reviewers turned to Shakespeare as an example of what Byron could have been, but failed to live up to: in other words, Shakespeare represented an Edenic state from which Byron had fallen away. For this they often used the image of Shakespeare as a “darling child of nature” in contrast to the “spoiled child” that was Byron in 1821 for the *London Magazine* (in a review by Hazlitt) or the “freaks of the petted child” for the *Literary Museum* in 1823 (Reiman 4: 1596; 1506-7). In August 1817 the *Mentor* praised Shakespeare over Byron and the *Edinburgh Review* also used Shakespeare’s dramatic anonymity as a foil to the perceived intensity of selfhood in Byron’s works. This is why Francis Jeffrey could salute Byron’s Shakespearean “moral sublimity” in 1814 and then rebuke him for not being Shakespeare in 1821: “Let Lord B. then think of Shakespeare — and consider what a noble range of character, what a freedom from mannerism and egotism, there is in him!”<sup>3</sup> When Murray relayed news of Frere’s reception of *Beppo* to Byron he invoked the sense of the ‘Protean’ Shakespeare: “Mr Frere is at length satisfied that you are the author of ‘Beppo’. He had no conception that you possessed the protean talent of Shakespeare, thus to assume at will so different a character” (Smiles 1: 393).

This changeability also appears in the important letter to Murray about *Don Juan* first transcribed by Peter Cochran:

Like Shakespeare he shows that his soul can soar well into the seventh heaven, & that when he returns into this body he can be as merry as if sublimity ne’er was known. — But Lord B. should have been grave & gay by turns; grave in one page & gay in the next; grave in one stanza & gay in the next; grave in one line, & gay in the next. And not grave & gay in the same page, or in the same stanza, or in the same line. (John Murray Archive ms.)

Cohen’s criticism takes me to the idea of sublime mixture and the question of whether the sublime can co-exist with merriment or whether

the comic inevitably taints or even cancels the possibility of sublimity. Many of Shakespeare's eighteenth-century critics believed that a mixture of genres was dangerous and that, for example, even a misplaced word could contaminate and collapse the sublime mood. One famous example is Lady Macbeth's speech "Come, you spirits" with her appeal to "thick Night" to come in order that "my keen knife see not the wound it makes, / Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, / To cry 'Hold, hold!'" (1.5.50-54). Several eighteenth-century critics shuddered over the words "blanket" and "knife" in this speech as lapses of diction which interrupted and compromised the speech's sublimity. This small-scale objection is, of course, at odds with other arguments for the sublime as a product of extreme simplicity or matter-of-factness as in the poetry of Homer or biblical verses.<sup>4</sup> Byron's own example was the line from Isaiah 63, "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?" In the "Letter to John Murray" (1821) Byron asked his readers: "would 'the Comer' be poetical without his '*dyed garments*'? which strike and startle — the spectator" (CMP 137). I shall return to the Pope Bowles controversy below.

In contrast to the view of the sublime as an elevated platform that one could fall off, it is also possible that the tremendous reach of moving from the sublime to the ridiculous could itself be sublime (rather than ridiculous). This is where the contrast between Milton and Shakespeare (much favoured by Hazlitt, Coleridge and Keats) comes in. A critic in the *Bee* in 1794 found that "In enraptured sublimity Milton has gone beyond [Shakespeare]" — but not "in spirit and manner" where Shakespeare generates "boundless imagination."<sup>5</sup> Here Milton typifies the sublime as a lofty place to which writers aspire and which they may occasionally reach whereas Shakespeare is a whole universe. This is, I think, what Byron means when he depicts his Shakespearean sublime in *Aurora Raby*:

Aurora — since we are touching upon taste,  
 Which now-a-days is the thermometer  
 By whose degrees all characters are classed —  
 Was more Shakespearian, if I do not err.  
 The worlds beyond this world's perplexing waste  
 Had more of her existence, for in her  
 There was a depth of feeling to embrace

Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space.  
(DJ 16. 48)

The stanza takes us to the interesting question of what on earth makes Aurora Shakespearean for Byron who is, according to Lady Blessington at this time, keen to offend English sensibility by debunking Bardolatry. Is Aurora a Shakespearean heroine like Cordelia or the “later heroines” as G. Wilson Knight suggests?<sup>6</sup> Or does she represent the character of Shakespeare himself or the character of his plays? In stanza 48 Aurora is, I think, potentially terrifying although I would agree with Bernard Beatty that there has to be something potentially comforting in her plenitude as well: “Aurora’s depth of feeling ‘embraces’, that is to say has a larger coverage than and is united lovingly with boundless thought” (Beatty 200). She is not simply of a “holy, cold and still conversation” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.7.119-20). I would tentatively suggest that it is the roominess of Aurora that makes her Shakespearean — if that’s not too homely a translation of Byron’s “Space.” Space acquires its astrological sense in the 1660s according to the OED; it is not a word Shakespeare used for the stellar system although Hamlet’s “king of infinite space” (2.2.225) anticipates it. It is more of a Miltonic word, perhaps; except, of course, that Shakespeare’s plays offer simultaneous ideas of space.<sup>7</sup> This infinite expansiveness is what I’m going to argue constitutes the Shakespearean / Byronic sublimity which just a few reviewers picked up.<sup>8</sup>

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Let us turn to *Antony and Cleopatra* act 1 scene 1:

ANTONY: Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the rang’d empire fall! Here is my space,  
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike  
Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life  
Is to do thus.  
(34-7)



The Shakespearean text to which the possibility of a mixed sublime clings most closely is *Antony and Cleopatra* (although *Hamlet* might also be a close contender: Johnson sees them both as exhibiting great “variety”). *Antony and Cleopatra* is most obviously the play where Shakespeare’s chopping and changing of place plays merry havoc with dramatic unity and it is the play in which the question of ‘how far can you not go’ is put to the test. Antony’s idleness and uxoriousness are part of (rather than counting against) his greatness in both Shakespeare’s and Dryden’s versions of his character. In March 1812 the *Literary Panorama* assessed Byron’s genius in the following terms: “ ‘His virtues and his vices are so mingled’ as Ventidius said of Mark Antony — as must confound God’s choice” (Reiman 4: 1521). This is, of course, an allusion to Dryden’s *All for Love* (3.1.49-51) rather than *Antony and Cleopatra*, but Dryden like Shakespeare plays with the melting of boundaries, the dislimning and confounding of categories. The ideal of a stylistic excess is nowhere more evident than in Cleopatra’s rhetorical, bountiful creation of her absent lover: “his delights / Were dolphin-like, they show’d his back above / The elements they lived in” (5.2.88-9).

The dolphin image in particular was used by reviewers to celebrate Byron’s style. It is either invoked as a direct quotation or comes through in literary echoes as when the *Literary Gazette* reviews the first cantos of *Don Juan* in July 1819 (before the prevailing negative impression sets in): “like the dolphin sporting in its native waves, however grotesque, displaying a new hue and a new beauty, the noble author has shewn an absolute controul over his means.”<sup>9</sup> There is a wide range of opinion about the meaning of the dolphin image in Cleopatra’s speech; but in a Byronic context, bearing in mind Byron’s image of sunset over the Brenta in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* canto 4 and his pleasure in swimming (which is another part of his answer to Cohen), there is room for a sublime of “magical variety” generated in the pleasure of change and “new colour” (CHP 4. 29), and the interaction of the human and the elemental.<sup>10</sup> I’d like to suggest that this stylistic exuberance — this sheer pleasurable versatility and delight in the liberating potential of transition and digression — is the sublime of most significance for Byron. I don’t claim that this is the sublime as he understood it, but it comes close to his critique of the sublime as other writers of his day defined it. It is also close to the alternative sublime that has been offered by feminists keen to

get away from the masculine version established first by Burke and then by Kant.

If, instead of a sublime based on overwhelming masculine power and indomitable will, we locate a sublime in plenitude and musicality as ways of exciting the passions, we are closer to one late eighteenth-century sublime inheritance recognized by Byron and his readers. In 1771 James Usher suggested that “the charms of music . . . though real and affecting, seem yet too confused and fluid to be collected into a distinct idea.”<sup>11</sup> This Protean sublime anticipates recent attempts by Anne Mellor, Patricia Yaeger and Catherine Maxwell to define a female aesthetic more powerful than the beautiful. The key quality of Yaeger’s female sublime is that it holds together “the forces of possession and domination” with “transcendence . . . in a different key” (Yaeger 198-9). She uses Elizabeth Bishop’s encounters with nature as scenes “of empowerment in which the other is not obliterated or repressed.” Flexibility, the ability to change one’s mind or direction is vital to this mode and it is (naturally) the opposite of the single-minded heroic selfhood which constituted Byron’s sublime for many of his readers.

To understand what makes Aurora Shakespearean and sublime I think it helps to return to the Pope Bowles controversy where Byron articulates, albeit not very simply, his own sense of what makes the sublime or poetical (I think he frequently uses those terms interchangeably). It’s in the 1821 “Letter to John Murray Esqre” that Byron declares his hatred of the word “‘*invariable*’ ” (CMP 129), and where he meditates on sublimity as an attribute of art rather than human nature, declaring that “Art is *not* inferior to Nature for poetical purposes” (138). There is then a fascinating note on Johnson’s response to Dover Cliff in *King Lear*. Johnson felt that this failed to be sublime because the “overwhelming idea is dissipated and enfeebled [by the] observation of particulars . . . The enumeration of the choughs and crows, the samphire man and the fishers, counteracts the great effect of the prospect as it peoples the desert of intermediate vacuity, and stops the mind in the rapidity of its descent through emptiness and horror” (Vickers 5: 138). Again, we have the experience of checks and interruptions. The same description was the subject of a later debate with Garrick about the finest poetical passage in English. When Garrick proposed the Dover Cliff passage, Johnson

disagreed because “it should be all precipice, — all vacuum. The crows impede your fall . . . The impression is divided; you pass on by computation, from one stage of the tremendous space to another” (Vickers 6: 570). Byron quotes the controversy (although it does not actually support his case) because he is disputing the poetical force of external nature alone, and arguing that reference to life is needed:

It appears to me that St Peter’s — the Coliseum, the Pantheon — the Palatine the Apollo — the Laocoon — the Venus di Medicis, — the Hercules — the dying Gladiator — the Moses of Michel Angelo . . . are as *poetical* as Mont Blanc or Mount Aetna — perhaps still more so — as they are direct manifestations of mind — & *presuppose* poetry in their very conception — and have moreover as being such a something of actual life which cannot belong to any part of inanimate nature. (CMP 134)

Aurora’s depths of feeling and boundless thoughts partake of a direct manifestation of mind and “actual life.” She is a higher work of art rather than being inanimate nature. She is Shakespearean because she smiles and she is stern: she holds the potential to be a divine intervention, to move in any number of different ways and because her plenitude exceeds the immediate context of Norman Abbey. She is a figure of digression in a purely aesthetic way just as Adeline is a figure of digression in a moral or immoral way. They both hold the potential to alter the whole course of the poem, but we cannot, at this stage, fathom those possibilities.

When Byron wrote canto 16 in 1823 he was, of course, living in exile in Italy.<sup>12</sup> I shall conclude by suggesting that although Byron’s contemporaries instinctively reached for Shakespearean critical discourse of the sublime when assessing Byron’s poetry, Byron baffled their attempts to identify a new national bard. If his dramatic experiments seemed to slight Shakespeare and the English tradition by returning to the discipline of the Unities his reference to Great Britain as “your Country” (as opposed to ‘our literature’) in the “Letter to John Murray” in 1821 confirmed to his critics that he had severed himself utterly from his native

line (CMP 150). By ostentatiously rejecting the most significant English precedent for a sublimely mingled way of writing, Byron expelled himself from the Shakespearean sublime of generous and prolific creativity. It was only after 1824 that Byron and his work were allowed to re-ascend to the category of the sublime through the belated discovery that his death left a “gap in nature.”

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- <sup>1</sup> My attendance at this conference was made possible by a British Academy Overseas Conference Travel Grant for which I would like to record my gratitude.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Mirror* nos. 99 and 100, Edinburgh, 17 and 22 April 1780 (Vickers 6: 272). "Yet, amidst the gloom of melancholy and the agitation of passion in which his calamities involve him, there are occasional breakings-out of a mind richly endowed by nature and cultivated by education" (274).
- <sup>3</sup> Rutherford 230. In his review of *The Corsair* and *The Bride of Abydos*, Jeffrey wrote that Byron "alone has been able to *command* the sympathy, even of reluctant readers, by the natural magic of his moral sublimity, and the terrors and attractions of those overpowering feelings, the depths and the heights of which he seems to have so successfully explored. All the considerable poets of the present age have, indeed, possessed this gift in a greater or lesser degree: but there is no man, since the time of Shakespeare himself, in whom it has been made manifest with greater fulness and splendour, than in the noble author before us" (54).
- <sup>4</sup> Byron's 1807 reading list describes the Koran as containing "most sublime poetical passages far surpassing European Poetry." See CMP 1.
- <sup>5</sup> "On *Othello*." The critic signs himself "W.N." January -February 1791 (Vickers 6: 557).
- <sup>6</sup> Knight has a thought-provoking comment immediately after this quotation; "Such, then, are some of Byron's beyond-tempest statements in terms of spatial art, corresponding to those of Shakespeare's final period." See Knight 287-8.
- <sup>7</sup> See *Paradise Lost* I, 650: "Space may produce new worlds."
- <sup>8</sup> For the dynamics of dilation in Byron's poetry and the relationship between the sublime and Byron's art of digression, see Paul M. Curtis, "At his old Lunes: Byron and Digression, Performance and Performative," in *Byron*, Palgrave Advances Series, ed. Jane Stabler (London and New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).
- <sup>9</sup> Reiman 4: 1412; 1410. M. R. Ridley in the Arden edition notes: "This seems to mean that not even the sea of pleasure in which he lived could conceal the strength and greatness of the man, which his very pastimes displayed" (Ridley 200).
- <sup>10</sup> The Dolphin was, although reviewers could not have known, the name of Foulweather John Byron's ship. Byron uses the image of sportive dolphins in *The Corsair* and *The Island*. Milton describes the way that "bended dolphins play" in *Paradise Lost*, VII, 410. I am grateful to Bernard Beatty for pointing out to me that the image of the dolphin dying through various hues appears in Falconer's *The Shipwreck* canto 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Kevin Barry discusses Usher's equation of music and poetry because "both include that principle of knowledge and enigma which the mind desires." Usher had earlier hypothesized that "Milton, Shakespeare and Dryden might have had the same genius for music as for literature" (61). Blair opposed musical structure and arrangement of words as a source of the sublime in his discussion of Longinus's critique of Sappho's Ode.

- <sup>12</sup> There is a further continuity of thought between "The Letter to John Murray" and *Don Juan* canto 16 in the mention of the long wall of Malamocco "which curbs the Adriatic" and "is not less sublime and poetical than the angry waves which vainly break beneath it" (CMP 140); and the note to stanza 59, ("An edifice no less sublime than strong . . . For Gothic daring shown in English money") "Ausu Romano, aere Veneto is the inscription (and well inscribed in this instance) on the sea walls between the Adriatic and Venice . . ." (CPW 5: 767).