

Byron in 1816 and the Intertextual Sublime

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Special Issue, 2005

Des actes sélectionnés du 30^e Congrès international sur Byron
« Byron and The Romantic Sublime »

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014361ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/014361ar>

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Publisher(s)

Revue de l'Université de Moncton

ISSN

0316-6368 (print)

1712-2139 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Riley, T. (2005). Byron in 1816 and the Intertextual Sublime. *Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, 251–264. <https://doi.org/10.7202/014361ar>

Article abstract

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BYRON IN 1816 AND THE INTERTEXTUAL SUBLIME

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Résumé

« Churchill's Grave » et « Monody on the Death of Sheridan » sont les premiers textes à indiquer que Byron commençait à songer sérieusement aux aspects métaphysiques de l'identité de l'auteur. L'immortalité ambiguë qui s'attache au nom d'un poète, un thème mineur ayant toujours subi un traitement conventionnel, devient un thème majeur pendant les huit dernières années de la vie de Byron. « Churchill's Grave » et les autres écrits de 1816 surtout témoignent d'une plus grande sensibilité à la textualité du poème. Aussi « personnels » ou passionnés qu'auraient pu être ces textes dans la vie naturelle de l'auteur, tous les écrits publics glissent immédiatement vers une sphère intertextuelle dans laquelle l'identité naturelle devient un marqueur sans vie, un « nom » assujetti à d'innombrables appropriations et réappropriations. Les deux poèmes ont formé le style qu'adoptera Byron par la suite puis la façon dont il abordera la célébrité et la notoriété.

On the day Byron had planned to leave England in April of 1816, the ferry to Calais was delayed, so Byron, Hobhouse, and Scrope Davies put up for the night in Dover. Someone, probably Byron himself, remembered that one of his favorites of early reading, the poet Charles Churchill, was buried nearby, and after dinner the friends made a visit. In the large and desolate public burial ground of St. Martin's, Byron saw an untended grave with a simple stone, unexpected given Churchill's fame when he died in 1764, and the equally anomalous epitaph, drawn from one of Churchill's poems, "Life to the last enjoy'd, here Churchill lies."

Both the account of the visit, provided by Hobhouse (Broughton 335), and the poem which Byron wrote upon it sometime that summer have recently figured in several critics' readings of Byron's development,¹ and deservedly so. "Churchill's Grave: A Fact Literally Rendered" is Byron's most complicated attempt at a Romantic genre poem and a key indication of his evolving attitude toward public discourse. And this is so despite the fact — ultimately because of the fact — that the situation and at least one part of Byron's response to it was utterly conventional: the living poet contemplating the literary remains of a dead poet, and seeing there the ambiguous form of immortality reserved for the famous writer:

I stood beside the grave of him who blazed
The comet of a season, and I saw
The humblest of all sepulchres, and gazed
With not the less of sorrow and of awe
On that neglected turf and quiet stone,
With name no clearer than the names unknown,
Which lay unread around it . . .
(lines 1-7)²

Had Byron not felt some identification with Churchill, both the poet and the man, we might have no more here than another entry in the canon of European elegies: carefully themed and structured, reverential and didactic in the *sic transit gloria* mode — a poem which, in its carefully resolved complexity, is itself a kind of monument. But what is distinctive in the "Churchill's Grave" scenario is that the conventions fail him, and Byron represents himself scrambling and extemporizing through to a not-very-satisfactory resolution.

In the poem Byron focuses on the obscurity of Churchill's name, but at graveside, the inscription surely took Byron immediately to another text, the source of the epitaph, Churchill's *The Candidate*:

Let one poor sprig of Bay around my head
Bloom whilst I live, and point me out when dead;

.....
And when, on travel bound, some riming guest
Roams thro' the Church-yard, whilst his dinner's dress'd,
Let It hold up this Comment to his eyes;
Life to the last enjoy'd, *here* Churchill lies;
Whilst (O, what joy that pleasing flat'ry gives)
Reading my Works, he cries — here Churchill lives.
(lines 152-3, 156-61)

Churchill predicts his grave will be easy to find because his poetry is still popular; he lives on in the minds of his readers. But everything the “riming guest” of 1816 imagined upon the event overturned these cheerful clichés. Churchill’s poetry is now “unread,” neglected like the page of his gravestone, and the epitaph, though immortal in its way, is lodged in a context that gives it a grim irony Churchill never could have imagined, and quite out of any living writer’s control. That Byron’s own control as a writer is at stake is clear in the drama he constructs out of the memory. The indirectly rendered question he puts to the sexton in lines 7-10 (“I asked / The Gardener of that ground, why it might be / That for this plant strangers his memory task’d / Through the thick deaths of half a century”) makes him dependent on the memory of another. But the sexton refuses to remember (“Well, I do not know . . . / He died before my day of Sextonship, and I had not the digging of this grave”), prompting the long despairing question of lines 15-19:

— and do we rip
The veil of Immortality, and crave
I know not what of honour and of light
Through unborn ages, to endure this blight
So soon, and so successless?

The implied answer is of course yes, this is what happens to writers — unless, by dumb luck, they find the right kind of readers.

The sexton's first reply is disingenuous, for he has his own interests in this scene, as he shows when he grandiloquently turns up the right answer in lines 27-32: "I believe the man of whom / You wot . . . Was a most famous writer in his day." The sexton has understood Byron's oblique question, and in recalling that Churchill was a writer, he prepares the way for a satisfactory resolution of the scene. But the sexton appears to know that he's worth something in his role as universal reader, and to know that he is cooperating with Byron in providing a resolution to this scene; and he wants something back for his trouble: "And therefore travellers step from out their way / To pay him honour, — and myself whate'er / Your honour pleases." Byron represents himself as "most pleased" (32) to come up with a gratuity for this perfect allegorical figure, though without forgetting that the universal reader is also a universal gravedigger.

But at this point he digresses briefly. Turning from the memory of the virtually omnipotent reader, the sexton (now become "The Architect of all on which we tread, / For Earth is but a tombstone" [20-21]) back to the present of composition, Byron makes an out-of-genre turn to his own future readers, and preempts their amusement, their power over him, by accusing them of having already misunderstood: "Ye smile, / I see ye, ye profane ones! all the while, / Because my homely phrase the truth would tell. / You are the fools, not I . . ." The readers would smile to see Byron get into this comic little situation, digging around in his pocket for some coins. What such readers don't understand is that the comic interruption of the genre *is* the way out. And in this poem it allows the resumption of the elegiac convention in the last five lines — a little trite, but effective enough.

for I did dwell
 With a deep thought, and with a soften'd eye,
 On that Old Sexton's natural homily,
 In which there was Obscurity and Fame —
 The Glory and the Nothing of a Name. (39-43)

"Churchill's Grave" records Byron's brush with a world in which the commonplace conceptions of the role and destiny of the writer fall away, and the more austere aspect of literary history is revealed. The graveyard scene represents not only one instance of the cruelty of time, but an

allegory of the way a living writer *always* passes into his own text, thence to an immortality over which he has no control. Genre is therefore a narrower aspect of the problem, for genre likewise requires a conventionalized response to past inscriptions, a step into an established history. A dead writer calls out, by way of a poem — the dead writer's works all have the status of epitaphs now — demanding that the living writer to respond in a certain way: to say, for instance, “here Churchill lives!” Any conventional response becomes immediately part of that history: Byron's poem becomes an epilogue to Churchill's. And the more carefully the generic conventions are followed — the more carefully the monument is crafted — the less control the writer has over the contexts into which the reader will inevitably misplace it. But establishing and then breaking the genre — the turn to reader is one option — opens other possibilities, if not for control, exactly, at least for making it permanently difficult for future readers to place the work in a foreign or distorting context.

The manuscript of “Churchill's Grave” contains another powerful pre-emptive gesture. The poem occupies three sides of two pages, and on the fourth side appears a note, looking there very much like an afterthought but styled as a preface, which suggests a good deal about the significance of this poem in Byron's rethinking of poetic identity.

The following poem (as most that I have endeavoured to write) is founded on a fact; and this detail is an attempt at a serious imitation of the style of a great poet — its beauties and its defects: I say, the *style*; for the thoughts I claim as my own. In this, if there be anything ridiculous, let it be attributed to me, at least as much to Mr. Wordsworth, of whom there can exist few greater admirers than myself. I have blended what I would deem to be the beauties as well as defects of his style; and it ought to be remembered, that, in such things, whether there be praise or dispraise, there is always what is called a compliment, however unintentional. (Byron, “Churchill's Grave” ms.)

The complexities of “attribution” described here preclude any univocal interpretation of “Churchill’s Grave;” but at least part of this perfectly ambivalent critique might be paraphrased “Don’t blame me; don’t blame him; *both* Wordsworth and I are ridiculous when we try this sort of thing.” Byron has imagined future readers ridiculing his fumbling attempts to rescue Churchill’s name. The implication might be that all such redemptive elegies, including Wordsworth’s carefully resolved examples of the genre, are ineffectual — subject, like inscriptions on a headstone, to neglect, vandalism, calumny, and, inevitably, misinterpretation.

“Churchill’s Grave” was either on Byron’s mind or already drafted when, on 9 July, remarkably, came another call from a dead writer, for a genre poem. A letter from Douglas Kinnaird informed Byron that their friend Richard Brinsley Sheridan had died and asked Byron to compose an “address or monody” to be read from the stage at Drury Lane Theatre — an exasperating charge, difficult to refuse because of his private friendship with Sheridan, and all the more dangerous because the friendship was well-known. It was a potential trap — not just another target for his critics, but the very kind of work, requiring scrupulous adherence to convention, most liable to slip out of his control as soon as it left his hands. Among other difficulties, there was a sharply defined existing sequence for such an elegy as Byron would be attempting: whatever he produced would invite comparison to Sheridan’s own stage piece, the “Verses to the Memory of Garrick, Spoken as a Monody, at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane” (1779), which was itself a recollection of Garrick’s “Ode in Commemoration of Shakespeare,” recited by Garrick in 1769 at Drury Lane, among other venues.

There is considerable evidence that the existence of Sheridan’s “Monody” represented something of a problem from the outset — a prior work that had somehow to be acknowledged. Byron rarely used the word “monody;” picking up Kinnaird’s term for his title is a nod to Sheridan. In his 1813 journal, Byron recalls having in company given Sheridan credit for the “best address” in the language, the “Monologue,” as he called it there, “on Garrick” (BLJ 3: 239). When Byron sent the completed poem to Kinnaird, he specifically requested that the stage be furnished with an urn, and an urn had been the central prop for the reading of Sheridan’s elegy to Garrick. The most tangible connection between the two works

can be found in section seven of the “Detached Thoughts” of 1821. Again recalling Sheridan, whom he mentions more often in that journal than any other writer, Byron writes:

One day I saw him take up his own “Monody on Garrick”. — He lighted upon the dedication to the Dowager Lady Spencer — on seeing it he flew into a rage — exclaimed “that it must be a forgery — that he had never dedicated anything of his to such a d— —d canting b— —h &c. &c. &c.” and so went on for half an hour abusing his own dedication, or at least — the object of it — if all writers were equally sincere — it would be ludicrous. (9: 15)

An emblematic story: contexts changed, for Sheridan, but published works are immutable, and often become embarrassing; the persistence of print into distorting contexts was central to the problem Byron had examined in “Churchill’s Grave” now faced in writing the “Monody” on Sheridan.

For this elegy would be drawn immediately into a dense and ramified intertextual network. That the Dowager Lady Spencer was the grandmother of Caroline Lamb was only the first of a series of potentially compromising, and quite public, ironies: that Sheridan’s “Monody” had in its day been widely (and often unfavorably) compared to Garrick’s “Ode;” that Sheridan was accused of borrowing too heavily in it from other writers, including Charles Churchill, whose *Rosciad* had satirized the Drury Lane backstage life under Garrick; that in the same year that he composed the “Monody” on Garrick (1779) Sheridan had also “borrowed” a longish simile on the subject of plagiarism (gypsies defacing a stolen child so its parents won’t recognize it) from Churchill’s *The Apology* (1761) and used it in Act 1 of his play *The Critic*, and that he would use the same simile on the floor of Commons five years later, in accusing Pitt of plagiarism³; that Byron himself had at the least come close to plagiarizing Churchill’s *The Times*,⁴ drawing phrases and images for *English Bards*; and that Byron’s, Sheridan’s and Garrick’s poems are tied to Drury Lane traditions and to traditions of public performance descending, by way of Garrick, from Shakespeare.

Other ironies were more personal. Byron had been thinking seriously about his own response to Wordsworth since reading Hunt's *The Feast of the Poets* in the fall of 1815, and Shelley pressed Wordsworth upon Byron in the summer of 1816. Wordsworth's "Essay on Epitaphs" — that peculiar treatise in which Wordsworth declares that "a principle of immortality" awakens in a man "a desire to live in the remembrance of his fellows" — was first published in Coleridge's *The Friend* in 1810 and was then reprinted in 1814 as a note *The Excursion*, which Byron owned but sold at auction just two weeks before his visit to Churchill's Grave. Coleridge comes into the story on his own. His "Monody on the Death of Chatterton," the best known "monody" of the day, appeared first as part of the prefatory material to an edition of the Rowley poems in 1794 and was subsequently the first poem in his *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1796, a volume in which Churchill is quoted in the preface and which includes a sonnet to Sheridan, and which Byron owned (in its 1803 edition) and sold at the same auction. (Also let go at the auction were Byron's two-volume collected Churchill and *The Feast of the Poets*; we may assume that Byron had himself sorted the library for sale and thus had had recent reminders of all these texts.⁵) Coleridge had made a more recent and dramatic appearance: it was just the previous October that Byron had discovered, and apologized to Coleridge for, the apparently accidental plagiarism of "Christabel" in *The Siege of Corinth*: a resemblance called "close, though unintentional," in the note Byron added to future editions of that poem. Any number of paths take us now either into the many other monodists and elegists of Byron's day or back to the eighteenth-century satirists and sentimentalists — and as the network grows, so do the shadows of forgery, plagiarism, and textual appropriation and dislocation.

What emerges from the network is a series of questions about the stability of a writer's identity, authority, and ownership — issues of "attribution" Byron could no longer toy with as he had in the preface to "Churchill's Grave." Sheridan's "use" of Churchill's simile in *The Critic* and in Commons: was it plagiarism? a quotation Sheridan assumed his listeners would recognize? or an homage or imitation? Or, assuming that he had read *The Apology* at all, might Sheridan have simply forgotten the source of the simile? No writer immersed in the cultural productions of his own day can avoid reflecting some unconscious influences; and deliberate imitations (as Byron seemed to have recognized as early as

Hours of Idleness, to judge by the Preface to that book) can often look like plagiarism. No discourse, no matter how overdetermined, can itself answer such questions; the questions that might arise are in any case unpredictable. Therefore no amount of energetic sincerity, no conventional rhetoric, can preserve a poem, or a poet, from future accusations. Some of the creative tension implicit in Byron's situation can be seen in his 20 July letter to Kinnaird enclosing the monody: "I send you — not what you want — but all I can give — and such as it is I give it with good will" (BLJ 5: 82-3). He goes on to fuss about several details of the monody's presentation, indicating his awareness of another emblematic scene: the poem on stage before its audience, exposed and vulnerable.

If "Churchill's Grave" has been neglected because of its complexity, The "Monody on the Death of the Right Hon. R. B. Sheridan" may have escaped close scrutiny (as Byron would have wished) because the author's caution imbues the work with a degree of dullness.

When the last sunshine of expiring Day
In Summer's twilight weeps itself away,
Who hath not felt the softness of the hour
Sink on the heart, as dew along the flower?
With a pure feeling which absorbs and awes
While Nature makes that melancholy pause —
Her breathing moment on the bridge where Time
Of light and darkness forms an arch sublime —
Who hath not shared that calm, so still and deep,
The voiceless thought which would not speak but weep,
A holy concord, and a bright regret,
A glorious sympathy with suns that set?
(lines 1-12)

The rhetorical questions of the opening lines require no answer, and the voice eludes identification: no "I" is asserted; the "feeling" is vaguely attributed to everyone ("who hath not felt"); and the feeling is one that would on the whole rather not make itself heard (it is, in line 10, "voiceless thought which would not speak but weep"). There is also, however, a clear indication of why the speaker has so nearly spiritualized

himself in the two references to weeping (the twilight weeping itself away in line 2, and the desire for weeping and “sympathy with suns that set” in 10 through 12). The speaker is on the edge of the world that Sheridan has crossed into: Sheridan’s name and works are no longer Sheridan’s, but are part of literary history, and the elegist feels the proximity of that world as he composes an address which is about to be consigned to that same impersonalizing history. The compositional problem then becomes not how to bring meaning and integrity to Sheridan’s life, but how to send this text into eternity with the maximum resistance to mis- or re-interpretation — *and* at the same time to fulfill the contract, paying conventional respect to Sheridan’s theatrical and political career.

The sunset conceit continues as the poet moves from the feeling to the man, in line 23: “A mighty Spirit is eclipsed — a Power / Hath passed from day to darkness” — though not without some close calls. In line 24, “to whose hour / Of light no likeness is bequeathed,” should probably read “from whose hour.” And in 33-4, that Sheridan’s lasting accomplishments are “sparkling segments” of his “circling soul” is consistent, if pushing the limits of what one can do with solar imagery. A bit forced also is his return to the metaphor in the conclusion of the obligatory part of the elegy. One still may find Sheridan’s genius in his characters, Byron writes in line 56, “Bright with the hues of his Promethean heat; / A halo of the light of other days, / Which still the splendour of its orb betrays.” Sensible, though one pauses over the connotations of “betrays.”

Nevertheless, a conventional structure is complete at line 58, and fairly well-wrought, with a few seams still showing. Byron could have moved directly into the peroration. But instead a new structure begins, certainly the one he’s been warming up for. Reminiscent of the turn to the reader in “Churchill’s Grave,” lines 59-94 turn toward the audience, or some portion of the audience, not with an abrupt and slightly desperate evasion, but with a carefully prepared pre-emptive agenda. As he had spiritualized himself, the speaker now disembodies his and Sheridan’s potential detractors: “But should there be to whom the fatal blight / Of failing Wisdom yields a base delight.” There follows a catalogue of the accidents that may befall the writer: wisdom or music may fail, in lines 59-64; in 79-94, poverty, disease, misery, indignity, may intervene. But lines 65-78

indicate the primary problem: foolish or malicious readers who react especially viciously toward the famous.

Hard is his fate on whom the public gaze
Is fix'd for ever to detract or praise;
Repose denies her requiem to his name,
And Folly loves the martyrdom of Fame.
(lines 65-8)

Fame has many natural enemies — “The foe, the fool, the jealous, and the vain” — who take on a range of roles: “sentinel, accuser, judge, and spy.” A host of them tracks the Glorious one beyond his grave and there, in lines 74-8, erects a parallel monument in literary history, an immaterial “Pyramid of Calumny.” And even then, there is no resting in peace: “Repose denies her requiem to his name:” an unquiet life is followed by an unquiet eternity. But as in “Churchill’s Grave,” the turn to the readers or listeners enables conclusion on a note of elegiac “sincerity,” now somewhat sheltered by the pre-emptive gesture.

Long shall we seek his likeness, long in vain,
And turn to all of him which may remain,
Sighing that nature form'd but one such man,
And broke the die — in moulding Sheridan!
(lines 115-8)

* * *

Dozens of passages in Byron’s late poetry testify that the relation of composition and identity had become his central poetic theme. The texts and contexts of “Churchill’s Grave” and the “Monody” on Sheridan offer a plausible origin for this preoccupation. What we find in the summer of 1816 is a version of the sublime neither Longinian nor Romantic, but instead looking forward to what is sometimes called, in recent parlance, the postmodern sublime. That particular anachronism will not take us very far in understanding what Byron’s textual and compositional experiences may have been. But he would certainly have recognized some of the main

concepts: the scene at the abyss played out at the writing desk: the poem, felt no longer as a work but as a text, or an intertext; and the author transformed by discourse into an author function.

Byron was uniquely positioned for such experiences. Many writers, of course, have felt the sting of vicious, motivated criticism and of both willful and sympathetic misinterpretation. But few poets of Byron's stature, of that or any other day, have found their publications so ransacked for evidence of specific personal misconduct; perhaps only Coleridge could have experienced anything like the tangle of textual coincidences that link "Churchill's Grave" and the "Monody" on Sheridan to a score of other parallel and precursor texts; and few people can have seen their lives quite so thoroughly subsumed by documents as Byron from January through June of 1816. Marchand's *Letters and Journals* gives but a taste of the duns and contracts and deeds and liens, and auction catalogues, into which fragments of Byron's lived experience were set down in words and removed from his control. Perhaps no famous poet was ever so prepared as Byron in 1816 to reconsider the relation between writing and personal identity.

From 1816 on, he never does stop reconsidering the way public discourse — at least to the degree that it remains conventional — supplants the life of the writer. Neither, of course, does he stop trying to deploy his rhetorical armaments, grown since 1816 from merely defensive gestures into a sophisticated arsenal for poetic war. But that powerless sinking into history is the organizing theme of the digressions in *Don Juan*, and even as he attempts to cheat time of its victory, Byron appears thoroughly convinced that the writer's life can never survive intact in his works, no matter how elaborately built. Those who've tried — Churchill, Wordsworth, Coleridge, himself at times — can be no more successful than King Cheops, who thought his Pyramid was just the thing

To keep his memory whole, and mummy hid;
But somebody or other rummaging,
Burglariously broke his coffin's lid:
Let not a monument give you or me hopes
(DJ 1. 219)

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- ¹ See especially Andrew Bennett, Jane Stabler, and Jerome McGann. Bennett characterizes the “Churchill’s Grave” as “one of Byron’s most carefully honed engagements with and ironisations of the Romantic culture of posterity” and a “deconstruction” of the writer’s relation to future readers. In his emphasis on Byron’s preoccupation with the future, his identification of several of the same ironies, and his projection forward into the grander project of *Don Juan*, Bennett’s reading is parallel to my own. Stabler describes “Churchill’s Grave” as a “blend of sentimental encounter . . . and parody” (47), an imitation of Wordsworth and at the same time a deployment of Churchillian satire. Stabler’s sustained argument (Chapter 2) makes Churchill Byron’s primary source for the 18th century digressive technique. More briefly, McGann treats “Churchill’s Grave” as a complex but nevertheless fairly straightforward satire on Wordsworth’s style, taking Byron’s prefatory endnote (“The following poem . . .”) as pointing out the comparison. I gave a fuller reading of the poem at the 1992 Byron Society panel at the MLA Convention, in “‘Churchill’s Grave’: Byron and the Monumental Style,” subsequently published under the same title.
- ² The texts of “Churchill’s Grave”, the “Monody on the Death of Sheridan,” and *Don Juan* are taken from the McGann edition.
- ³ Thomas Moore (180) was the first biographer of Sheridan to note the double plagiarism of Churchill’s “stolen child” simile. In *The Apology* (1761) Churchill had written of the plagiarist who “Still pilfers wretched plans, and makes them worse, / Like gipsies, lest the stolen brat be known, / Defacing first, then claiming for his own.” In Act 1, scene 1 of Sheridan’s *The Critic* (1779), Sir Fretful Plagiary describes the dangers of leaving one’s plays in the hands of another playwright: “Steal! — to be sure they may; and, egad, serve your best thoughts as gypsies do stolen children, disfigure them to make ‘em pass for their own. . . . A dext’rous plagiarist may do any thing.” In *The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, R. Crompton Rhodes suggests that the use of Churchill’s figure was Sheridan’s way of showing Sir Fretful’s hypocrisy (209) – and indeed it might have done so for those in the audience who remembered Churchill’s then fifteen-year-old poem. It is harder to explain Sheridan’s use of the same simile in Commons five years later (in a speech claiming that Pitt’s East India Bill was largely copied from an earlier defeated measure proposed by Fox – his exact phrasing on that occasion is not recorded).
- ⁴ See Albert Ball, who finds a “striking” resemblance between lines 13-6, 33-4, and 47-8 of Churchill’s *The Times* and lines 103-8 and 121-4 of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Perhaps the only quite “striking” resemblance is between Churchill’s “Time was, e’re Temperance had fled the realm” (l. 13) and Byron’s “Time was, ere yet in these degenerate days” (l. 103); other similarities are more distant. But Ball makes a cogent case for Churchill’s influence on *English Bards*.
- ⁵ William H. Marshall recorded the contents of the 1816 auction catalogue in “The Catalogue for the Sale of Byron’s Books.”