

Sex, Self-fashioning, and Spelling:
(Auto)Biographical Distortion, Prostitution, and Byron's Venetian Residence

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It is scarcely surprising that Leslie Marchand's laconic last footnote in the fifth volume of his monumental *Byron's Letters and Journals* has attracted little interest, even among the most dedicated scholars of Byron's Venetian sojourn. The ten words in question refer to the contents of a note, dated 15 December 1817 and addressed to the British Vice Consul in Venice, Richard Hoppner, who would later become Byron's regular riding companion on the Lido. In this brief message, Byron offers his excuses for not "paying his respects," and apologizes in advance for his failure to honour an earlier promise to call on his friend. Byron explains that this is because Hoppner "will probably be at the Count Goess's this evening, which has made me postpone my intrusion." Marchand's footnote refers to Goess: "Probably Moore's misreading of 'Count Goetz,' the Austrian governor of Venice."¹ It is true that elsewhere in his correspondence Byron consistently wrote "Goetz," but, in fact, the name of the Austrian governor of the *pr`vince venete* of the Habsburg Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia really was "Goess," as spelled here in Byron's apologetic note. On this occasion, Byron had for once got the name right. Alternatively, Moore had bothered to correct his friend's notoriously cavalier spelling. Marchand, however, makes the casual assumption that the correct spelling was mistaken. A consultation of any of the few standard books on the establishment of the Habsburg rule of Venice after the fall of Napoleon – at the time Marchand was editing this volume of the letters this would probably have meant a work by

¹ Leslie Marchand (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals* (London: John Murray, 1973-82), V, 279. It should be noted that Goess also sometimes rendered his name as "Goëss."

the American scholar Reuben John Rath – would have immediately demonstrated his error.² Yet for Marchand there was no need to check because Byron remained the authority on Venice, even when it came to how to spell the names of senior Habsburg officials.

That a scholar chose to believe that Byron's normal misspelling was correct, and that the correct spelling was the result of an early biographer's slapdash transcription could be more charitably explained as just one of those minor errors that all researchers occasionally make. Yet it is symptomatic of a wider problem with the way in which many Byronists, and especially those with a biographical perspective, treat the years of Byron's residence in Italy. Marchand made a silly mistake. Silly mistakes are made all the time. Yet this is silly mistake that has subsequently been repeatedly replicated by scholars, despite a steadily growing literature on the history of Venice during the *sec`nda d`minazi`ne austriaca*.³ Goess, for example, remains "Goetz" in Fiona MacCarthy's biography of the poet, just as it does in the work of Peter Cochran.⁴

² Much research on post-Napoleonic Venice has been undertaken since the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, had Marchand wished to check on the name of the Austrian Governor, he could have consulted Arthur G. Hass, *Metternich, Re`rganizati`n and Nati`nality 1813-1818* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1963) or Reuben John Rath, *The Pr`visi`nal Austrian Regime in L`mbardy-Venetia 1814-1815* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969). In Italian the standard text was Augusto Sandonà, *Il Regn` L`mbard`-Venet` 1814-1859, la c`stituzi`ne e l'amministrazi`ne* (Milan: L. F. Cogliati, 1912), and in German a variety of works by the great Joseph Alexander von Helfert, most notably *Zur Geschichte des L`mbard`-Venezianischen Königreichs, v`l. XCVIII `f Archiv für österreichische Geschichte* (Vienna: Alfred Hölder, 1908). Alternatively the *Almanacc` per le pr`vincie s`ggette all`i.r. G`vern` di Venezia* was widely available, and the *C`llezi`ne di leggi e reg`lamenti pubblicati dall'Imp. Regi` G`vern` delle Pr`vince Venete*, which makes frequent mention of Goess, could have been consulted in the British Library.

³ There is now a much wider and more accessible corpus of literature on Venice in the early nineteenth century. See especially, Alvise Zorzi, *Venezia austriaca, 1798-1866* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1986); Marco Meriggi, *Amministrazi`ne e classi s`ciali nel L`mbard`-Venet` (1814-1848)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983) and *Il Regn`-L`mbard` Venet`* (Turin: UTET, 1987); Eurigio Tonetti, *G`vern` austriac` e n`tabili sudditi. C`ngregazi`ni e municip nel Venet` della restaurazi`ne (1816-1848)* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1997); David Laven, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs, 1815-1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴ Fiona MacCarthy, *Byr`n: Life and Legend* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 318. Peter Cochran (ed.), Teresa Guiccioli, *L`rd Byr`n's Life in Italy (Vie de L`rd Byr`n en Italie)*, trans. Michael Rees (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 2, 84, 106.

It is perhaps strange that Byron's residence in Venice – described famously by Cecil Roberts as “the most interesting chapter of Byron's life, either as artist or man”⁵ – continues to fascinate biographers, given that the narratives they provide for the period between November 1816 and December 1819 are virtually identical. Thus John Julius Norwich tells the story in a way that – despite the historian's evident dislike for the poet – differs very little in material content from Fiona MacCarthy's biography.⁶ Should a reader turn to Peter Quennell's 1941 *Byron in Italy*, (s)he is unlikely to find any significant differences.⁷ Quennell's book, in turn, is remarkably similar to Thomas Moore's *Life* of 1830.⁸ The reason, of course, for the similarity in accounts of Byron's Venetian episode is that the principal source employed – even by Moore who had first-hand experience – has been Byron's own correspondence.⁹ What we apparently know about Byron in Venice is overwhelmingly dependent on what Byron himself wrote to the likes of John Cam Hobhouse, Douglas Kinnaird, Moore, Samuel Rogers, John Murray, his sister Augusta, and Richard Belgrave Hoppner. It is these letters that provide not only the foundations, but also the brick, mortar, and stucco of any account of Byron's Venetian years. Byron's biographers usually supplement them by use of his poetry and dramas, either penned while in Venice or written subsequently, but nonetheless addressing Venetian themes. Marchand is not alone in affording the poet undisputed authority. The Venetian period of Byron's biography remains a

⁵ Cecil Roberts, “Byron in Venice,” *F'rtnightly Review*, 55 (1924), 60. Byron arrived in Venice from Switzerland via Milan on 10 November 1816 in the company of his friend John Cam Hobhouse. He left Venice, never to return, on 21 December 1819.

⁶ See: John Julius Norwich, *Paradise 'f Cities. Nineteenth-century Venice seen thr'ugh F'reign Eyes* (London, 2003), 40-71; Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron*, 316-73.

⁷ Peter Quennell, *Byron in Italy* (London: Collins, 1941); see also Quennell's “Byron in Venice,” *H'rizz'n*, 2 (1940), 300-17, and 3 (1941), 47-62.

⁸ Thomas Moore, *Letters and J'urnals 'f L'rd Byron with N'tices 'f his Life* (London: John Murray, 1830).

⁹ The one exception to this general rule is Nazzareno Meneghetti, *L'rd Byron a Venezia* (Venice: G. Fabbri di S, 1910), which provides a good deal of information – albeit deeply partisan – on the contemporary history of Venice, and on Byron's Italian acquaintances.

creation of his own pen.¹⁰ But if what we know about Byron in Venice is dependent on his own writings, this does not mean that they should be read uncritically. It is unfortunate that, notwithstanding the readiness of the same Byronists to pay lip service to the poet's careful construction of self within that account,¹¹ a "matter-of-fact" reading of Byron's letters continues to dominate.

What I intend to do in this essay is to challenge this deferential reading of the poet's account of his Venetian life. I wish to suggest alternative readings of Byron, which question his conscious self-fashioning as a reliable account of his Venetian experiences. My focus will be on Byron's relations with Venetian women as an example of the way in which his own account of events is approached uncritically. But I also want to reflect on Byron's sexual activity, which is in itself especially important to our understanding of his life in Venice, for it was principally through sex that Byron engaged with the modern city, a space that was in most senses completely distinct from "the fairy city of his imagination," the historicized and literary city of his poetry and plays.¹² If one reads Byron's correspondence it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he was neither interested in the material fabric of modern Venice nor in the bulk of its inhabitants, except for a very restricted circle of acquaintances who provided him with a local audience in the absence of English (or Irish) acolytes. Byron might boast that he could write more interestingly of Venice's past than Otway or Shakespeare because "of having been at Venice – and entered into the local Spirit,"¹³ but his extensive Venetian writings show an incredible want of interest in its art and architecture, or, for that matter, the

¹⁰ Byron's writings have also been enlisted – at times quite bizarrely – by Anglophones as the most authoritative voice on the city in which he chose to reside. It is not my aim here further to explore the way in which a Byronic vision of Venice dominated – and often grossly distorted – Anglophone (and, indeed, a wider European) understanding of the city throughout the nineteenth century, and in some senses continues to do so today. However, I have written about this elsewhere – see David Laven, "Lord Byron, Count Daru, and anglophone myths of Venice in the nineteenth century," *MDCCC*, 1 (2012).

¹¹ See, for example, Peter Cochran's description of Byron's flight to Italy as "a self-exile, a futile attempt at forging a new identity," *Byron and Italy* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2012), 2.

¹² Still the most interesting analysis of Byron's literary Venice is Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 17-66.

¹³ Letter to Murray from Ravenna of 8 October 1820. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VII, 194. On Byron's "sense of place" and how he was prepared to overlay it "with the heightened colours of literary tradition," see Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 57.

political and economic situation, or the lives of the local population.¹⁴ Moreover, Byron passed much of his time in Venice seeking out its least Venetian margins: riding on the sparsely inhabited Lido, studying Armenian (without ever fully mastering the alphabet) with the Mekhitarist monks on the island of San Lazzaro, swimming, or enjoying his *villeggiatura* on the Brenta. When not engaged in such activities, he seemed to have spent – given his professed delight at the absence of his compatriots in restoration Venice – a remarkable amount of time and energy either seeking out the company of fellow Britons or writing to them. His letters to British correspondents, as Fiona MacCarthy astutely observes, were performances.¹⁵ So too were his social interactions; indeed, even his ostentatious avoidance of social interaction was a theatrical and very public statement. To a degree, this simply reflected Byron's life-long tendency toward the solipsistic, so archly highlighted by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his review of Moore's *Life*,¹⁶ but these characteristic traits seem to have become especially exaggerated during his residency in the "Gehenna of the waters." At the same time – even by his own standards – Byron compulsively sought out sexual encounters when in Venice. In reading his letters from this period it is clear that he scarcely ever engaged with Venetian men, bar the occasional servant and gondolier (whose significance was defined precisely by their attachment and service to him, and who assume the same sort of place in his narrative as his favourite dogs), or the cuckolds and wittols of his sexual partners. It is not surprising, therefore, that Byron's sexual relationships with women during his Venetian period assume a special prominence in narratives of his life. My aim here is not to unpick systematically the way in which different authors have dealt with Byron's

¹⁴ See Laven, "Lord Byron," 8-9. In all Byron's Venetian correspondence, his sole specific criticism of the Austrian régime in Venice was the completely false accusation that Habsburg tyranny made it impossible to get hold of an English newspaper. See Byron's letter to Moore of 18 September 1818, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VI, 66.

¹⁵ "The real *raison d'être* of Byron's letters was their sparkling narrative of his Venetian life, portraying its hectic glamour, playing up the lewd. His tendency to treat correspondence as performance was now boosted by Byron's consciousness that Murray would be reading out his letters proprietorially to the gathering of literary cronies beneath Thomas Phillips' portrait of Byron in the Albemarle Street drawing room." MacCarthy, *Byron*, 323.

¹⁶ "For it is scarcely too much to say, that Lord Byron never wrote without some reference, direct or indirect, to himself;" "[Byron] was himself the beginning, the middle, and the end, of all his own poetry – the hero of every tale – the chief object of every landscape." Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Moore's Life of Byron," *Edinburgh Review*, 53:106 (June 1831), 552 and 569.

sexual activity. Rather I wish to analyse what that activity tells us more generally about his Venetian existence, and the treatment of that period by scholars, as well as making some observations on how – perhaps surprisingly – Byron’s sexual activity contributed to his commodification by Venetians.

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Let me turn once more to the example of Marchand, whose *Byron: A Portrait* remains one of the most authoritative accounts of the poet’s life. Marchand’s biography treats the poet’s systematic whoring with a lightness of touch that not only exonerates the poet entirely of any possible moral shortcomings but makes his accomplishments assume heroic proportions. Marchand never hides the fact that Byron paid for sex: to do so would be impossible. Thus Marchand cites Byron’s verse epistle to his publisher Murray of 8 January 1818: “Now, I’ll put out my taper / (I’ve finished this paper / For these verses you see on the brink stand) / There’s a whore on my right / For I rhyme best at Night / When a C—t is tied close to my Inkstand.” Marchand also briefly mentions Byron’s conquest of one Angelica during Carnival of the same year – a young, blonde, blue-eyed girl, who unusually “won’t take money” – as well as his contraction of “the first gonorrhea I have not paid for” from Elena da Mosta. In his account of the poet’s sexual activity, he comments on the manner in which Byron “plunged with more recklessness than ever into new affairs with Venetian women.” Marchand’s prose is revealing:

The middle- and lower-class Italian woman delighted him most – her flashing eyes, her frank abandonment to passion, her peasant humour. To indulge in promiscuous sensual pleasures with these women was for him a kind of revenge upon the cold and mathematical Anabella. [...] it is apparent that he had a manifest delight in physical pleasures of a nature that to some of his friends, even to Hobhouse, seemed coarse or gross [...]. But whatever he may have said afterwards in detailing these affairs to his friends in England, most of his liaisons and even his most casual encounters were lightened in his own mind at the time by a certain romantic aura.

In Marchand's account, Byron always remains a profoundly desirable sexual partner: a figure who "despite his growing obesity still appealed strongly to women of all sorts."¹⁷ What the biographer fails to mention here is that our sole evidence for this alleged attractiveness to the opposite sex is Byron's own self-fashioning and self-aggrandising narrative, of which he is always the centre. Marchand also quotes Byron's comments to James Wedderburn Webster in a letter of 8 September 1818 about how much he had spent on sex, and the cheapness with which it could be had in Venice:

I have spent about five thousand pounds – & I needed not have spent one third of this – had it not been that I have a passion for women which is expensive in it's [sic] variety every where but less so in Venice than in other cities [...] the sum of five thousand pounds sterling is no great deal – particularly when I tell you that more than half was laid out for Sex – to be sure I have had plenty for the money – that's certain – I think at least two hundred of one sort or another – perhaps more – for I have not lately kept count.¹⁸

I shall return to the significance of this passage later. For the moment I want to emphasize two things about Marchand's approach. First, the biographer again displays an uncritical readiness to take Byron's account at face value. Marchand has failed to take into consideration the figure that Byron is trying to cut, the audience for whom he is writing, the way in which he might be attempting to convince others and himself of the legitimacy of his actions, and the possibility that he may be teasing the reader by boasting of the transgressive nature of his conduct. Second, Marchand has internalized and then regurgitated the simplistic and "meridionalized" accounts of Italian/Venetian womanhood that are to be found in both Byron's prose and, to a lesser degree, in some of his poetry. A man who happily describes laying out huge sums of money on securing sex from Venetian women, yet whose poetry and

¹⁷ See also Doris Langley Moore, *The Late L'rd Byr'n* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1961), 485-86; Leslie A. Marchand, *Byr'n: A Bi'graphy* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957), II, 478; Judith Bailey Slagle, *The C'llected Letters `f J'anna Baillie* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999), II, 845-46.

¹⁸ Leslie A. Marchand, *Byr'n: A P'rtrait* (London: John Murray, 1971), 278-89. On the exchange of letters between Byron and Webster during this period, see also John Stewart, *Byr'n and the Websters: The Letters and Entangled Lives `f the P'et, Sir James Webster and Lady Frances Webster* (Jefferson: McFarland 2008) 121-22.

– except where Venetians are concerned – correspondence is full of extremely rounded and sophisticated (if not always kind or generous) descriptions of females real or imaginary, now reduces the whole of Venetian womanhood to the status of “whores” from whom he can take his pick.¹⁹ Strikingly, Marchand unquestioningly adheres to this stereotype. Not only does he refer to “the [...] Italian woman” in the singular as a kind of undifferentiated ideal, but he also takes Byron’s account of their mores as gospel: according to Marchand, *D`n Juan*, for example, benefits from “Byron’s accumulated observations of the farcical freedoms of Italian manners and his own contacts with the frailties of Venetian women gave him ample background for the rollicking bedroom comedy that is the climactic episode of the first canto.”²⁰ Byron’s view of Venetian womanhood is based on the simple assumption that they are physically alluring and can all be bought: as he remarks in stanza 15 of *Bepp`*, “And truth to say, they’re mostly very pretty / And rather like to show it, more’s the pity!”²¹ But they are also “all whores.”²² This reduction of *veneziane* to no more than purchasable sex objects, at best ascribed the character of animals when closer to him – his lovers become “tigresses” and “antelopes” to be ranked along his menagerie of terriers and mastiffs, bulldogs, mongrels and monkeys, horses and parrots – speaks not only of a predatory and cynical male gaze (to which, I would add, a male touch and penetration), but also of a distinct exoticizing of the local population. Simultaneously, by emphasising the “animal” nature and characteristics of Italian women, attributing to them the universal status of prostitutes, and adopting a patronizing, playfully ironic tone in his correspondence with his (almost exclusively) male friends, Byron managed both to “other” his conquests and establish a complicit misogyny with his readership/interlocutors that permits him conveniently to distance himself from

¹⁹ Writing to Hobhouse and Kinnaid, on 19 January 1819, Byron boasted in a vocabulary of pure misogyny of the huge numbers of women he had bedded in Venice over the previous twelve months: “some of them are Countesses – & some of them Cobblers [sic] wives – some noble – some middling – some low – & all whores – which does the damned old ‘Ladro – & porco fottuto’ mean? I have had them all & thrice as many to boot since 1817.” *Byr`n’s Letters and J`urnals*, VI, 92.

²⁰ Marchand, *Byr`n: A P`rtrait*, 287. For a wider discussion of non-Italian stereotyping of Italian sexual mores, see Roberto Bizzocchi, *Cicisbei. M`rale privata e identità nazi`nale in Italia* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008).

²¹ Byron’s poetry is quoted from *L`rd Byr`n: The C`mplete P`etical W`rks*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980-93). Canto and stanza references are given in the main text.

²² Letter to Hobhouse and Kinnaid of 19 January 1819, *Byr`n’s Letters and J`urnals*, VI, 92 (see note 19 above).

Venice when he wishes so to do: at one moment he is consorting with a beautiful woman and is inhabiting “the greenest island” of his imagination;²³ at the next he is having sex with a mercenary whore and is resident in “the Gehana of the waters.”

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As I have argued above and elsewhere, Byron completely failed to engage with his material surroundings in Venice, a city which he seems, after a brief initial spell, to have grown actively to dislike.²⁴ But while Byron sought out the margins of this “Sea Sodom,”²⁵ obsessively wrote to and consorted with his compatriots (despite stating his desire to avoid fellow Englishmen), spurned Venice’s better society, and progressively complained about his surroundings, it would seem that he liked living in the former *Serenissima* for two simple reasons: the chance to live economically and the possibility of having huge amounts of sex. Although suddenly earning money from his poetry, and, from 1818, possessed of capital from the sale of Newstead Abbey to his school fellow Thomas Wildman,²⁶ Byron was both dogged by debt and possessed of expensive habits. In these circumstances, the cheapness of living in Venice appealed. This cheapness was in large part a consequence of the city’s dire economic circumstances in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars: French rule had destroyed the remnants of its trade (contrary to popular belief, still flourishing in the late Republic), and restored Austrian rule had done virtually nothing to revivify it; meanwhile, famine dogged the Venetian *Terraferma* throughout Byron’s residence. But while Venice was cheap, the economic crisis it faced and which impinged on all classes of Venetian society, forced the local population into strategies for survival. While the local *camera di c`mmerci`* petitioned Vienna for the grant of free port status to restore its flagging fortunes, up to 50% of Venetians

²³ Letter to Moore of 17 November 1816, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, V, 129.

²⁴ See Laven, “Lord Byron,” 7-11.

²⁵ Letter to Richard Belgrave Hoppner of 31 December 1819, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VI, 262.

²⁶ Wildman’s wealth came from the possession of extensive estates in Jamaica, which his family had bought from another famously dissipated literary figure, William Beckford, whose accounts of “his beloved town of Venice” offer so much more than those of Byron. William Beckford, *Italy, Spain, and Portugal* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1845), I, 139. On Byron’s sale of Newstead see Doris Langley Moore, *Lord Byron: Accents Rendered* (London: John Murray, 1974), 224, 239.

were dependent on some form of charity, public, private, or ecclesiastical.²⁷ Against this background, the largesse of an English lord could even make sex with a priapic, obese, clap-ridden, frequently-drunk narcissist an attractive prospect. Byron's charm, good looks, contacts and celebrity had formerly made him an appealing catch, but as his Venetian residence wore on he was obliged increasingly, by his own confession, to buy sex, until he finally secured the affections of the impressionable, and very young, Teresa Guiccioli. Even if he possibly exaggerated his outlay and the numbers of his "conquests" – and an unpleasant sense of boastful, locker-room machismo underpins his letters – Byron took the fullest advantage of his spending power as a wealthy outsider.

Byron's outlook, then, was one of opportunistic sexual imperialism, indulging in the conspicuous consumption of Venetian womanhood, which he eroticized and exoticized, but which was made available to him because of poverty or, for the wealthier classes, economic hardship. Byron was plainly unembarrassed about buying sex, but his vanity demanded he present his sexual partners as models of pulchritude. While he might ungallantly refer to them as "all whores," he always protested their beauty. This was not borne-out by the comments of his peers. When Shelley – admittedly no fan of Italian womanhood – visited Byron in Venice, he was revolted by his friend's sexual activities, remarking in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, dated Naples, 22 December 1818, that

the Italian women with whom [Byron] associates are perhaps the most contemptible of all who exist under the moon – the most ignorant, the most disgusting, the most bigoted [...] Well L. B. is familiar with the lowest sort of these women, the people his gondolieri pick up in the streets. He associates with wretches who seem almost to have lost the gait and physiognomy of man, and who do not scruple to avow practices which are not only not named, but I believe seldom even conceived in England.²⁸

²⁷ On the economic crisis faced by Venice in the early restoration and the Austrian authorities' half-hearted attempts to deal with it, see David Laven, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs, 1815-1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90-102. On the relatively robust nature of Venice's economy in the eighteenth century, see Jean Georgelin, *Venise au Siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Mouton & École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1978).

²⁸ Roger Ingpen (ed.), *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: G. Bell, 1915), II, 651.

Moore was similarly unforgiving in his judgement after he visited Byron the following autumn. While the Irish poet was prepared to concede, on the authority of Alexander Scott, that Byron's first Venetian mistress, Marianna Segati, was allegedly "rather pretty," he was a good deal less impressed by his friend's other conquests. Moore challenged Byron's comic, yet romanticized, version of events surrounding his courting of the young noblewoman, Angelina, and observed damningly that she was "an ugly little ill-made girl,"²⁹ not the "little – pretty – sweet-tempered, – quiet, feminine being" described in Byron's letter to Murray of 18 May 1819.³⁰

The image cultivated by Byron sanctioned his paying for sex, and seeking it where he may; it allowed him to patronize, even despise his Venetian conquests. But it did not permit him to pursue ugly women. Rather than seeing this as a symptom of Byron's own careful and conscious construction of self-image, his biographers – Moore included – like most subsequent readers, have generally rehearsed his narrative, regurgitating it as part of a process of hagiographic myth-making. That, according to the private correspondence of Byron's friends, the women with whom he had sex were often degraded or ugly is perhaps neither here nor there, but just as he argued that the Venice that was of importance – the "fairy city" of stanza 18 of *Childe Har'ld* IV – was the Venice of the cultural imagination, fashioned by the words of fellow writers and by his own pen,³¹ so the Venetian women with whom he engaged were ultimately significant because of the part they played in his own letters, poetry, creative process, and self-fashioning. Neither for Byron nor his readers were those women important as individuals. Sex and writing were Byron's ways of engaging with the city, and its traditions, its history, and its distinctive culture. Sex was the bridge by which he reached the modern city. At the same time, the nature of his sexual relationships meant that it was a bridge that could at any moment be burned.

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²⁹ Wilfred S. Dowden (ed.), *The Journal of Thomas Moore* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), I, 223.

³⁰ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VI, 133.

³¹ Note the famous lines in stanza 18 of *Childe Har'ld's Pilgrimage* IV: "Otway, Radcliffe, Schiller Shakespeare's art / Had stamped her image in me." See also: Laven, "Lord Byron," 8-10; Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 17-66.

Yet it is worth remembering that the women with whom Byron had sex were not mere victims without agency. In his *Mém`ires d`utre-t`mbe*, Chateaubriand recounts seeing a particularly beautiful young mother in Murano. His response is to imagine what Byron would have done in the same situation:

Une femme portait un enfant emmaillottée; la finesse du teint, la charme du regard de cette Muranaise, se sont idéalisés dans mon souvenir. Elle avait l'air triste et préoccupé. Si j'eusse été lord Byron, l'occasion était favorable pour essayer la séduction sur le misère; on va loin ici avec un peu d'argent. Puis j'aurais fait le désespéré et le solitaire au bord des flots, enivré de mon succès.³²

Peter Cochran has pompously attacked Chateaubriand for this comment:

Byron [...] did not equate his genius with his capacity to seduce vulnerable women, and, indeed, by his own boast, never had to seduce anybody. If he paid for sex – and in Venice he certainly did – he paid well and to women (or family pairings of women, mother and daughter, sister and sister, etc [...]) who were well enough pleased with their double bargain.³³

Cochran here overlooks two things. First, that there is no evidence that the women Byron bought gained any more “pleasure” from their “double bargain” than they did from the sale of sexual labour to any other punter. This is speculation reinforced by Byron’s own self-aggrandizing narrative. Second, there was a simple reason that Byron did not have to seduce *veneziane*: why waste time and effort with seduction when all he had to do was offer cash? Byron paid for his women, and in Venice a little money went a very long way, even if, as Doris Langley Moore suggested, it was Byron’s “febrile” self-indulgence in sexual and other

³² François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mém`ires d`utre-t`mbe* (Paris: Eugène et Victor Penaud, 1849-50), XI, 172-73.

³³ Peter Cochran, “From Pichot to Stendhal to Musset: Byron’s progress through early nineteenth-century French literature,” Richard A. Cardwell (ed.), *The Recepti`n `f L`rd Byr`n in Eur`pe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), I, 46.

matters of immediate and impatient gratification that in large part lay behind his increasing obsession with “money,” which “became his theme in numerous letters” written in Venice.³⁴ But if Byron was unquestionably opportunist, calculating, and exploitative in his pursuit of sex in Venice, at least until he started his liaison with Teresa Guiccioli,³⁵ it would be completely wrong to suggest that the women with whom he had sex lacked agency. As Cochran suggests, sex with a generous foreigner was a more profitable and probably safer option (because less likely to attract the attention of the Austrian authorities, who took a dim view of prostitution) than sex with local men. Indeed, Segati, Byron’s first long-term Venetian mistress, was able to exploit her liaison even after it finished to maintain her status as kept woman. Rather than returning to her husband, she became the mistress of an Austrian officer who bankrupted himself in keeping her in the manner to which she had grown accustomed while with her English lord.³⁶ her experience with a wealthy foreign aristocrat gave her the leverage, experience, confidence, even celebrity to make demands of subsequent lovers.

A similar story – albeit on a less impressive level in material terms – could be told of Byron’s other relatively long-term lover, Margherita Cogni. The French poet, novelist, and future director of the *C`médié-française*, Arsène Houssaye, recounted how, with a companion, he had met “Margarita” [sic] as a still attractive woman, by now in her forties, selling oysters on the Lido. On hearing the two men mention the “nom magique” of her past lover, she had immediately recounted in dialect the tale of what was, in her version (or Houssaye’s version of her version), only a six-week affair, albeit it six weeks filled with drama and passion. As she continued with her story, it became clear to Houssaye that her goal was essentially to hold their attention, punctuating her tale at moments of tension with “Vous ne mangez plus messieurs?” and “Allons, messieurs! encore quelques huitres,” before finally presenting them with an oddly miscalculated and clearly inflated bill. Although she maintained that when Byron had tried to pay her off with “une bourse pleine d’or” she had

³⁴ Doris Langley Moore, *L`rd Byr`n: Acc`unts Rendered*, 226.

³⁵ In a letter to Kinnaid of 26 October 1819, Byron remarked that he had “not had a whore this half-year;” by 16 November he is telling Kinnaid that “I have not now for a year – touched or disbursed a sixpence to any harlotry.” *Byr`n’s Letters and J`urnals*, VI, 232, 241. The former seems more probable from his correspondence.

³⁶ *J`urnal `f Th`mas M``re*, I, 223.

tossed it contemptuously into the canal, in Houssaye's account it is quite clear that she had learned to capitalize on her brush with literary greatness.³⁷

The American Consul and novelist, William Dean Howells, did not remark on the women bedded by the poet, but he did make similar observations about the way in which he had become a "cosa di Venezia:" "you cannot pass his palace without having it pointed out to you by the gondoliers."³⁸ There was capital to be made out of the "cheap sentimentalism of Byron's life,"³⁹ just as there was money to be made out of him while he was a resident of Venice.⁴⁰ Moreover, that Byron sought to portray his engagement with Venice and its inhabitants in positive terms, when it was essentially a relationship based on exchange – cash for sex – established a precedent for many future British visitors. Foreigners in Venice often experienced a position of liminality, separated from (if yearning for) their own culture but still alien to the city in which they resided. As subsequent literary visitors (notably the homosexuals Frederick Rolfe, John Addington Symonds, and A. E. Housman) would find, in echoing Byron, and taking a Venetian "lover" – or several – they could subscribe to a myth of having been adopted by the locals. Thus acceptance of the Byronic myth effectively legitimated sexual tourism (or more often than not sexual residence), in which visitors with superior education and wealth imitated Byron in taking advantage of locals, whom they paid for sex, but whom they subsequently sentimentalized and idealized in their writing, justifying the purchase of sex as a means of buying not just physical pleasure, but also of getting closer to the city and its inhabitants. In Edward Saïd's elegant formulation they were "making imperialism palatable to itself" through focusing their narratives on "native subjects who

³⁷ See Arsène Houssaye, *Voyage à Venise* (Paris: Sartorius, 1849), 87-95.

³⁸ William Dean Howells, *Venetian Life* (London: Trübner, 1864), 223-24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴⁰ Cogni's husband managed successfully to exploit his wife's liaison, swapping from outraged and wronged cuckold to willing wittol: "well-timed financial assistance [...] seems to have offset the sour effects of Magnarotto's public humiliation." Cogni too seems to have also secured monies for herself and her mother. See Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley and his Circle, 1773-1822* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), VII, 201-2. Byron's gondolier, Giovanni Battista "Tita" Falcieri – in fact a brutal thug – was similarly able to exploit his status as the former servant of a celebrity. See Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967), 52. Byron, it might be noted, did not pay Tita especially well; had he done so, the Venetian might have been less well disposed to Byron's generous friends, including the homosexual William Banks, who appears to have paid him for sex. See Langley Moore, *L'rd Byr'n: Acc'unts Rendered*, 261, and Byron's letter to Banks from Ravenna of 19 February 1820, *Byr'n's Letters and J'urnals*, VII, 330.

express assent to the outsider's knowledge and power.”⁴¹ For the Venetians, of course, the Englishman who wanted sex was desirable not because it meant a brush with celebrity or literary greatness, but because it was a chance to make money: as the Venetian proverb goes, “al son de la campana (schi) ogni dona se fa putana” (at the sound of money, every woman becomes a whore).

⁴¹ Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 180.