

Hellenism and Homoeroticism in Shelley and His Circle

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SUMMARY. This paper discusses two leading English Romantic poets—Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon, Lord Byron—and three of their friends, who lived close together in Italy during the first half of 1822. Despite the censorious efforts of family, friends and biographers, ample evidence survives to establish the importance of male love in their lives and works. They were ardent hellenists, whose reference point for male love was the homoerotic ethos of Ancient Greece. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Shelley, Byron, Romantics, Plato, poetry, homoeroticism, hellenism

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note: "Hellenism and Homoeroticism in Shelley and His Circle." Lauritsen, John. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Homosexuality* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 49, No. 3/4, 2005, pp. 357-376; and: *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West* (ed: Beert C. Verstraete, and Vernon Provençal) Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2005, pp. 357-376. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service* [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: docdelivery@haworthpress.com].

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doi:10.1300/J082v49n03_13

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He who beholds the skies of Italy
 Sees ancient Rome reflected, sees beyond,
 Into more glorious Hellas, nurse of Gods
 And godlike men.

—Walter Savage Landor, “Shelley”

Male love occupied a place of honor in Ancient Greece, and was at least accepted in Rome and the rest of pagan Europe. This changed radically in the 4th century AD, when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, bringing with it the Judaic taboo on sex between males (*Holiness Code of Leviticus*, ca. 500 BC). From this time forward, for well over a millennium, men suffered dishonor, imprisonment, torture and death . . . for loving each other. Male love became a sin and a crime: sodomy, which was *peccatum illud horribile inter Christianos non nominandum* (the sin so horrible it must not be named among Christians; Lauritsen, 1998).

With the Renaissance, homoerotic themes begin to appear in the works of Ariosto, Beccadelli, Marlowe, Michelangelo, Poliziano, and Shakespeare. The emancipation of male love came on the historical agenda in the 18th century, as the Enlightenment brought a secular viewpoint to questions of morality and extended free enquiry to the *peccatum mutum* (the mute or silent sin). In 1791 the French Constituent Assembly introduced legislation which left homosexual acts unpunished (a reform more than two centuries ahead of the United States), and in 1810 the *Code Napoléon* declared that private consensual acts between adults were not subject to punishment in countries under Napoleonic jurisdiction (Lauritsen, 1998).

Histories of the early homosexual rights movement usually begin with the writings of Heinrich Hössli (1836) and Carl Heinrich Ulrichs (1864), although underground gay scholarship undoubtedly existed much earlier. This article and my next book will examine two great English Romantic poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon, Lord Byron (hereafter Byron), and their circle of friends in Italy: Thomas Medwin, Edward John Trelawny, and Edward Ellerker Williams. My theses are that male love was present in their lives and works, that these men had what may be considered gay consciousness, and that their ardent hellenism comprehended Ancient Greece as a spiritual homeland for male love.

Before going into their story, a few words about terminology: I shall occasionally use *gay* as being in some contexts the least awkward and

even least anachronistic word, defining a gay man as one who acknowledges homoerotic desire in himself. (*Homosexual* is unacceptable for linguistic as well as philosophical reasons.) Although all the men in the Shelley-Byron circle had wives and children, they were nevertheless gay (if we understand that the term includes both the bisexual and the exclusively gay categories). Rictor Norton (1997) has demonstrated that by Byron's time, the words *gay* and *lesbian* were already used and understood in their current, homoerotic sense.

I'll also use *camp*, a word that has been discussed often, but seldom well. I define camp as the unique sense of humor—and style and sensibility—of gay men. Camp combines elements of theatricality, irony and hyperbole. At the heart of camp is a mockery of the situation in which we find ourselves—our predicament as gay men in a malevolent culture—and so camp includes a mockery of sex-roles, a mockery of taboos and conventions, a mockery of danger, a mockery of condemnation.

The term *male love*, whose linguistic heritage goes back to classical antiquity, is understood as comprising sex, love and friendship.

The lives of the men in the Shelley-Byron circle have been purged and falsified by their friends, family and biographers, who attempted to destroy every trace of homoeroticism, as well as to fabricate spurious signs of heterosexuality. It is therefore important to recognize and reject two fallacies: (1) assuming that the evidence we now have (letters, manuscripts, etc.) is *all* there was, and (2) assuming that surviving evidence is *representative* of what there was.

In the case of Shelley, the waters have been muddied by a campaign of disinformation waged by his widow, Mary, and his son's wife, Lady Jane Shelley—a campaign described as “the fraudulent and mistaken efforts to turn the romantic, pagan Shelley, as Hogg, Peacock, and Trelawny knew him in the flesh, into a Victorian angel suitable for enshrinement among the gods of respectability and convention” (Smith, 1945). These two women suppressed and bowdlerized Shelley's writings, destroyed pages from diaries, and defamed the character of Shelley's first wife, Harriet. The destruction of evidence, and the manufacture of lies, has been so extensive that “no definitive biography of Shelley can now be written” (Smith, 1945).

Not only Shelley's life received this treatment. Byron's memoirs, on which he had lovingly worked for years, were burned after his death. Trelawny's letters also were burned. The final two volumes of Thomas Jefferson Hogg's *Life of Shelley* disappeared, through the treachery of Lady Shelley (Seymour, 2000). The men in the Shelley-Byron circle who survived long enough to challenge the “Shelley legend”—Medwin

and Trelawny (as well as Shelley's friends in England, Hogg and Thomas Love Peacock)—were attacked for having done so, and to this day are treated unfairly by most Shelley and Byron biographers (Peacock, 1858-1860; Holmes, 1974; Smith, 1945; Massingham, 1930; Lovell, 1962; Scott, 1951; MacCarthy, 2002).

The discerning biographer must take seriously those expressions of homoeroticism that did slip by the censors. Sometimes these expressions were remarkably direct, but more often they were in the form of coded language or hints intended only for the initiated: the "*sunetoi*" or "esoteric few" or "discerning few"—as Shelley referred to his intended readers. In his 1925 study on Shelley, Edward Carpenter makes this crucial point:

Since the whole weight of herd-suggestion actively fosters and encourages the expression of all feelings of love towards the opposite sex and actively represses any patently homosexual expression, one clear indication of the latter is worth more as evidence than a dozen conventional signs of the former. (p. 86)

During the entire lifetime of Shelley and Byron, males in England, including adolescent boys, were hanged for having sex with each other. Therefore, when we encounter male love in their writings, even expressed obscurely or in hints, we should realize that this took courage. Even *camp*, or perhaps especially camp, was a form of defiance.

There is more than enough material on this topic for a large book. The present essay, with limited space, can tell only part of the story, and must do so in broad strokes. It will be structured as follows: the formation of the Shelley-Byron circle; descriptions of the individual men, with particular attention to Shelley; hellenism; and the aftermath of the circle.

As told by Edward John Trelawny (1858), the story begins in Geneva, late 1819 or early 1820: Trelawny, an ex-sailor, meets Edward Ellerker Williams and Thomas Medwin, lieutenants on half-pay returned from India. Trelawny and Williams are in their late twenties, and Medwin a few years older. At the "pretty villa" where they are living, Medwin often turns conversations to his cousin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who is living in Italy. From Medwin's descriptions of the "inspired boy, his virtues and his sufferings," Trelawny and Williams develop a longing to meet him. Without saying so directly, Trelawny manages to convey the impression that three gay men are discussing another gay man.

A letter from Shelley in 1820 urges Medwin to join him in Italy, "the Paradise of exiles, the retreat of Pariahs"; and Medwin does so. The two cousins, reunited after an absence of many years, collaborate intensely in writing poetry, translating Greek and German, and studying Arabic. Before long they are joined by Williams, together with his common-law wife, Jane—and later by Trelawny. The far more famous poet, Lord Byron, has moved his residence to be near Shelley. And so, at the beginning of 1822 the circle of men living close together in Italy comprises Shelley, Byron, Medwin, Williams and Trelawny. What brought them together, and what did they have in common? Biographers have shied away from asking these and other pertinent questions.

Both Shelley and Byron considered themselves to be in exile. Shelley in particular was homesick, and bitter that he was unable to return to England. Why did they choose Italy? One very good reason might be the disparity between Italian and English sexual legislation: in England sex between males remained punishable by death until 1861, but in Italy it was legal, thanks to the *Code Napoléon*. In addition, gay men have traditionally gone to Italy for the boys: famous from time immemorial for their beauty, their amiability, and their discretion.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 to a rich squire in Sussex. In appearance he was tall, slender, good-looking, feminine, and youthful.

In 1925 the gay pioneer Edward Carpenter observed that Shelley's relations with women were unhappy, transitory or "up in the air"—whereas he "certainly attracted the devotion of his men friends . . . and was capable of warm and faithful attachment to them." Carpenter comments that "while the love-interest occupies such a large part of the general field of Shelley's poetry, it occurs almost always in a very diffused and abstract form." The many female characters in his poetry seem peculiarly epicene and sexless. I would go even further. Although Shelley was a feminist, and seemed to require sisterly female companionship; although he was married twice, and fathered several children; there is little evidence that he was erotically attracted to women. Both of his marriages were unhappy; both came about through the initiative of the women.

In early October of 1814 Shelley wrote to his friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg:

I saw the full extent of the calamity which my rash and heartless union with Harriet . . . had produced. I felt as if a dead & living body had been linked together in loathsome & horrible communion.

This refers to Shelley's wife of three years, Harriet: an intelligent, well-bred, loving, beautiful young woman, who was only 19 years of age at the time. It is hard not to interpret Shelley's effusion as abhorrence of female sexuality in general—and indeed, the sentiment is that of a gay man trapped in a heterosexual marriage.

In the summer of 1814 Shelley left Harriet and fled to the Continent with Mary Godwin and her stepsister, Jane (later Claire) Clairmont. Mainstream Shelley biographers have assumed that Shelley was so overwhelmed with love for Mary that he impetuously eloped with her. But if so, why on earth did he take along her stepsister Jane for the trip? An alternative explanation is that Mary, raised in a most radical household, had led Shelley to believe that she (and presumably also Jane) would be sympathetic to and understanding of his homoerotic desires. Mary's own lesbianism manifested itself after the death of Shelley (Seymour, 2000).

Harriet Shelley committed suicide in late 1816, two years after Shelley abandoned her. Despite Shelley's principled opposition to marriage, and his desire to respect the memory of Harriet, he was then coerced into marriage with Mary Godwin, who threatened suicide (St. Clair, 1989). Shelley's marriage to Mary, a cold and querulous woman, was not happy; for the last two years he slept on the sofa and spent as little time as possible in her company.

If Shelley had one great love in his life, it was Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who was expelled from Oxford with him when they were both 18, over a pamphlet they had written together, *The Necessity of Atheism*. They lived together in London briefly, until they were separated by their families. Nowhere in Shelley's correspondence does one find such passion as in his letters to Hogg:

You have chosen me, and we are inseparable. . . . Are you not he whom I love . . . ? . . . If I thought we were to be long parted, I should be wretchedly miserable—half mad! . . . Will you come; will you share my fortunes, enter into my schemes, love me as I love you, be inseparable, as once I fondly hoped we were? . . . Oh! how I have loved you! I was even ashamed to tell you how! . . . Why did I leave you? I have never doubted you—you, the brother

of my soul, the object of my vivid interest; the theme of my impassioned panegyric. (Hogg, 1858, pp. 206-209, 230-232; Holmes, 1974, pp. 91-93)

As a prank Shelley and Hogg published some poems, which they had intentionally made ridiculous. The handsomely produced book, entitled *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson: Being Poems found Amongst the Papers of that Noted Female Who Attempted the Life of the King in 1786*, was published under the pseudonym of John Fitzvictor. (The real Peg Nicholson, a washerwoman who had attempted to assassinate King George III with a carving knife, was still alive and residing in Bedlam.) In Hogg's (1858) account he states, tongue-in-cheek:

I have one copy, if not more, somewhere or other, but not at hand. There were some verses, I remember, with a good deal about sucking in them; to these I objected, as unsuitable to the gravity of a university, but Shelley declared they would be the most impressive of all. (p. 161)

Presumably this refers to the following stanza, from "FRAGMENT: Supposed to be an Epithalamium of Francis Ravailiac and Charlotte Cordé":

SOFT, my dearest angel stay,
 Oh! you suck my soul away;
 Suck on, suck on, I glow, I glow!
 Tides of maddening passion roll,
 And streams of rapture drown my soul.
 Now give me one more billing kiss,
 Let your lips now repeat the bliss,
 Endless kisses steal my breath,
 No life can equal such a death. (lines 82-90)

Death in line 90 is a metaphor for orgasm, and the rhythmic urgency of line 84 clearly conveys the act of *fellatio*. Though ostensibly heterosexual, the stanza indicates that the two Oxford freshmen were not unfamiliar with cocksucking.

According to Timothy Webb (1976), "Shelley was a translator of extraordinary range and versatility, whose acquaintance with European literature makes most English poets between Dryden and Eliot look provincial" (p. 2). He had a penchant for translating works with homoerotic

content, including elegies of Bion and Moschus and epigrams of Plato. Here is his translation of the Plato epigram, *Kissing Agathon*:

Kissing Agathon, together
With the kiss, my spirit was
Upon my lips and there I kept it—
For the poor thing had come thither
As if it were departing.

Shelley was not naive. He knew quite well that in 19th century Christendom two males could not kiss each other in an amorous context. And so, “Kissing Agathon” was reluctantly changed to “Kissing Helena” in the third revision (Webb, 1976).

In another epigram Plato expresses love and mourning for the boy Aster, whose name means “star” in Greek. Shelley renders it as follows:

To Aster

Thou wert the morning star among the living,
Ere thy fair light had fled—
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
New splendour to the dead.

Here he bowdlerized only the title, changing the masculine name Aster to the feminine name Stella.

During the summer of 1818, when he was 26 years old, Shelley translated Plato’s Dialogue on Love, *The Banquet* (or *Symposium*). Judged as a work of literature in its own right, it is by far the best translation in the English language (Plato, Ed. 2001).

Shelley had lived with the dialogue for many years. While still a schoolboy at Eton, he was introduced to it by his mentor, Dr. James Lind (“that divine old man”), about whom he always spoke with reverence. Why did Dr. Lind introduce Shelley to this particular dialogue? Perhaps it was to inform his teenaged protégé, by means of the *Symposium*, that male love is a part of human nature, which had been highly esteemed by the Greeks. The significance of Dr. Lind’s tutelage can be gauged through comparison with an event that occurred several decades later. In the 1850s, another English schoolboy, John Addington Symonds, read the *Symposium* for the first time. Alone in his room at Harrow, he experienced the great epiphany of his life:

Harrow vanished into unreality. I had touched solid ground. I had obtained the sanction of the love which had been ruling me from childhood. Here was the poetry, the philosophy of my own enthusiasm for male beauty, expressed with all the magic of unrivalled style. And, what was more, I now became aware that the Greek race—the actual historical Greeks of antiquity—treated this love seriously, invested it with moral charm, endowed it with sublimity. (Symonds, 1984, p. 99)

Realizing that a stumbling block for readers would be the fact that male love lies at the heart of the dialogue, Shelley wrote an introductory essay, *A Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love*. It is only the second in English (after an unpublished 1785 essay by Jeremy Bentham) to address male-to-male sexuality (Crompton, 1985).

The first part of Shelley's essay is an eloquent expression of hellenism. It begins:

The period which intervened between the birth of Pericles and the death of Aristotle, is undoubtedly, whether considered in itself or with reference to the effects which it has produced upon the subsequent destinies of civilised man, the most memorable in the history of the world.

For several pages, he describes the Greek miracle, in the realms of art, poetry, drama, philosophy, and science (Plato, Ed. 2001).

Unfortunately, when Shelley comes to his main topic, he flinches: he maintains untenably that the degraded status of women in Ancient Greece caused the males to turn to each other for sex, and he almost hysterically denies that "disgusting" acts or acts associated with "pain and horror" could have been practised by the Greeks. These references are obviously to anal intercourse: either he was afraid that it would hurt, or he knew from a bad experience that it did. Hinting at his own preference, Shelley, after alluding to the wet dreams of puberty, conceives of orgasms as "the almost involuntary consequences of a state of abandonment in the society of a person of surpassing attractions"—which suggests *frottage*, full-body contact, the *Princeton Rub* (Plato, Ed. 2001).

At any rate, Shelley doubted that he could publish either translation or essay in the foreseeable future, though he showed them to his friends. In 1822, just short of his 30th birthday, he was drowned in a boating accident. The translation was not published until 1841, and then in a bowdlerized form. His widow Mary mutilated the text to bring it into

conformity with Victorian standards of decency. She changed "men" to "human beings" and "love" to "friendship"; she truncated the Alcibiades episode. Her travesty was the only version the world would know for almost a century, until essay and translation were finally published in their entirety in 1931 (Ingpen, 1931; Notopoulos, 1949).

In the fall of 1818 Shelley visited Byron in Venice, renewing their friendship after a hiatus of two years. Delighted with each other's company, they talked nonstop, from three in the afternoon until five the next morning. For days the two of them talked, dined, rode horseback, and travelled in gondolas together. Out of these experiences came *Julian and Maddalo*, a highly autobiographical and problematic work. There are three main characters in the poem: Julian, Maddalo, and the Maniac. Julian is Shelley, and Count Maddalo is Lord Byron, but who or what is the Maniac? In his introduction to the poem, Shelley writes:

Of the Maniac I can give no information. He seems, by his own account, to have been disappointed in love. He was evidently a very cultivated and amiable person when in his right senses. *His story, told at length, might be like many other stories of the same kind.* (Italics added)

This is a very great, underappreciated, and misinterpreted poem. Its deeper meaning can best be appreciated by knowledgeable gay men (the "discerning few"), who can apprehend the coded references, and who can respond to the poem from their own experience. For them it is a beautiful and moving expression of alienation and undeserved suffering. A heterosexual red herring involving a "lady" is thrown in, but the references to her serve no purpose other than mystification; Shelley himself slyly indicates that the "lady" should not be taken seriously.

At home in Count Maddalo's palazzo in the evening, Maddalo and Julian decide to camp a bit less and have a serious talk about something they find difficult to discuss:

Our talk grew somewhat serious, as may be
As mocks itself, because it cannot scorn
The thoughts it would extinguish:—'twas forlorn,
Yet pleasing, such as once, so poets tell,
The devils held within the dales of Hell. . . .

Julian and Maddalo discuss religion and philosophy until late in the night, and the next day they sail to "the island where the madhouse

stands" to visit the Maniac, who is known to Maddalo. They listen to his long soliloquy, in which the references to male love, to the *unnameable sin* (what Lord Alfred Douglas would later term "the love that dare not speak its name") are clear and unmistakable. The Maniac speaks of having to "wear this mask of falsehood even to those/Who are most dear." He is bound to silence: "And not to speak my grief—O, not to dare/To give a human voice to my despair." He refers to "deeds too dreadful for a name." In the following passage, the Maniac touches on *the love that is friendship*:

O Thou, my spirit's mate
 Who, for thou art compassionate and wise,
 Wouldst pity me from thy most gentle eyes
 If this sad writing thou shouldst ever see—
 My secret groans must be unheard by thee,
 Thou wouldst weep tears bitter as blood to know
 Thy lost friend's incommunicable woe.

He associates his form of love with the dungeon, shame, and the scaffold:

Heap on me soon, O grave, thy welcome dust!
 Till then the dungeon may demand its prey,
 And Poverty and Shame may meet and say—
 Halting beside me on the public way—
 "That love-devoted youth is ours—let's sit
 Beside him—he may live some six months yet."
 Or the red scaffold, as our country bends,
 May ask some willing victim. . . .

Shame, which Shelley has capitalized, is a gay code word which surfaced towards the end of the 19th century, most famously in the poems of Lord Alfred Douglas, "Two Loves" and "In Praise of Shame" (McKenna, 2003). The "red scaffold" and "our country" can only refer to England, where men and boys were still being hanged for making love to each other. What the Maniac personifies, then, is the suffering of gay men, who are unjustly despised and persecuted.

The last love of Shelley's life, his inseparable companion for the last one-and-a-half years of their lives, was the handsome and sensitive Edward Ellerker Williams, the same age as himself. Their relationship is charmingly depicted in *The Boat on the Serchio*, in which "Melchior"

and "Lionel" represent Shelley and Williams, and the boat symbolizes their relationship (Medwin, 1847/1913). The playful banter of the two friends, as they prepare for a boating excursion, could be that of a male couple sailing in Provincetown in the summer. It is perhaps the happiest poem that Shelley ever wrote.

Lionel and Melchior are obviously very fond of and at ease with each other. One line hints that they share a common bed, and in the final stanza Shelley communicates to the "discerning few" that their relationship is sexual. The "death which lovers love" can only mean *orgasm*, which not coincidentally rhymes with the terminal words in lines 3, 5, and 7. This may be the grandest portrayal of orgasm in literature:

The Serchio, twisting forth
Between the marble barriers which it clove
At Ripafratta, leads through the dread chasm
The wave that died the death which lovers love,
Living in what it sought; as if this spasm
Had not yet passed, the toppling mountains cling,
But the clear stream in full enthusiasm
Pours itself on the plain. . . .

In 1822 Shelley and Williams died in a boating accident, together with "a smart sailor lad" named Charles Vivian (Trelawny, 1858). Shortly before this Shelley had written an epitaph expressing his desire to be united with Williams, both in life and after death:

They were two friends, whose life was undivided.
So let them mingle. Sweetly they had glided
Under the grave. Let not their dust be parted,
For their two hearts in life were single-hearted. (Medwin,
1847/1913)

The late poem *Epipsychidion* is particularly interesting for some additional lines, which were found and printed in 1903. Never intended for publication, they indicate that disguised male love is a theme of the poem, and that heterosexual red herrings (akin to "Helena" and "Stella") have been employed. In a letter to his publisher, Charles Ollier, Shelley insisted the poem be published in strict anonymity, in an edition of only 100 copies: "It is to be published simply for the esoteric few." In the passages below, "friend" and "mistress" are counterparts, meaning male and female lovers respectively. Note Shelley's reference

to Shakespeare's sonnets, and his contempt for the "dull intelligence" of those readers who are not among his *sunetoi*:

Here, my dear friend, is a new book for you
 I have already dedicated two
 To other friends, one female and one male,—
 What you are, is a thing that I must veil;
 What can this be to those who praise or rail?
 I never was attached to that great sect
 Whose doctrine is that each one should select
 Out of the world a mistress or a friend,
 And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
 To cold oblivion. . . .

If any should be curious to discover
 Whether to you I am a friend or lover,
 Let them read Shakespeare's sonnets, taking thence
 A whetstone for their dull intelligence. . . .

BYRON

Biographers and critics, with very few exceptions, have refused to acknowledge homoeroticism in the life and work of Shelley. This is not the case with Byron, whose sexual proclivities were known in gay circles at least as early as 1821 (Hirschfeld, 1914). A recently published biography by Fiona MacCarthy (2002), the best to date, treats Byron's sexuality candidly and sympathetically. In her Introduction MacCarthy makes two important points: "Our understanding of Byron's bisexuality, an open secret within his own close circle, throws important light on the pattern of his life." Yes, indeed, it is necessary to acknowledge Byron's homoeroticism in order to understand his life and his work; and yes, of course, those in Byron's circle knew that he was gay.

Byron was a bundle of contradictions. A wealthy peer of the Realm, his early childhood was spent in poverty. Shy, pale and effeminate, short and with a strong tendency to become fat, crippled with a foot deformity, he nevertheless became the reigning male sex symbol of the 19th century. To this day the Byronic hero is the archetype of the swaggering male adventurer, with his sardonic and defiant virility. Byron had an abundance of character defects—he could be mean and petty to

even his best friends—but he also had charm and a gift for empathy, which gained lasting devotion from those close to him.

Byron had what may be called “gay consciousness”: he had gay friends from Cambridge, with whom he corresponded using private code words derived from Greek myth and Roman literature (for example, *hyacinths*, referring to the myth of Apollo and his love for the beautiful youth, Hyacinthus; Crompton, 1985).

Byron was an adept at camp. Accused of carrying off a girl from a convent, he wrote, in an 1819 letter to Richard Belgrave Hoppner: “I should like to know *who* has been carried off—except poor dear *me*—I have been more ravished myself than anybody since the Trojan war.” Fiona MacCarthy (2002) comments: “Here is Byron as progenitor of a high camp English manner of expression that extends to Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank, Noël Coward” (p. xiii).

Byron strongly preferred all-male company. From 1816 in Switzerland: “the evenings at Diodati were masculine ones. Shelley came alone, but Byron pacified the ladies by calling occasionally at Shelley’s cottage” (Marchand, 1970, p. 249). By 1821, when Byron and the Shelley circle were living in Pisa, there were no longer even token visits to Shelley’s residence. Instead, Shelley, Medwin, Williams, and Trelawny visited Byron’s palazzo on an almost daily basis for pistol shooting, billiards and conversation. In December Byron began giving weekly stag parties for his small circle of friends, with fine food and wine; often he and his guests “talked over their wine until two or three in the morning.” The ladies were never invited (Marchand, 1970; Medwin, 1966).

Byron’s biographers have strained mightily to heterosexualize his life, for example, by overemphasizing his boyhood crush on Mary Chaworth, a girl several years older than he. The time has come to reevaluate this and other relationships, such as his famous affair with Countess Teresa Guiccioli.

The young Countess Teresa, or “La Guiccioli” as Byron and his friends affectionately called her, left her husband—the “evil” Count Guiccioli, a man 40 years older than herself—for Byron. Though their affair is always assumed to be sexual, it may not have been. In her old age Teresa commented on Byron’s biographers:

In all their writings they have romanticized my person, and converted into love and passion a sentiment which no one has the right to see in any other light than that of a warm and enthusiastic friendship. (Origo, 1949, p. 463)

Perhaps she was telling the truth. There are subtle indications in her reminiscences of Byron, that she knew he loved other males, and accepted this (Guiccioli, 1868). Perhaps she was one of those women who are especially attracted to gay men: Teresa was fond of Byron's friends, and they were fond of her. Teresa neither lived in Byron's palazzo in Pisa nor entered it; when he wished to see her, he went to her residence (Marchand, 1970).

Biographers tend to neglect Teresa's handsome younger brother, Count Pietro Gamba, who was Byron's constant companion for the last four years of his life. On 29 July 1820, Byron wrote Teresa: "I like your little brother very much." Within two months Pietro had become "Pierino" to Byron, and closer to him than Teresa (Origo, 1949). When Byron departed for Greece in 1823, to fight for Greek independence, he took Pietro with him, but left Teresa behind. A sobbing Pietro was at Byron's bedside when he died in 1824, aged 36. He accompanied Byron's remains back to England, where he wrote an account of the poet's last year. Then Pietro returned to Greece, where he died in 1827, only about 24 years of age (Marchand, 1970; Gamba, 1825; Origo, 1949; MacCarthy, 2002).

Byron's greatest poem, the very long *Don Juan*, is a unique mixture of satire, irony, whimsy, insouciance, and other qualities not easily defined. The poem is *camp*, and as such can be appreciated best by gay men, who know the conventions, rhythms, and language of camp. *Double entendres* abound. Throughout are hints and sly references to male love, for example (referring to Virgil's Second Eclogue, where the shepherd Corydon expresses his love for his master's darling, Alexis): "But Virgil's songs are pure, except that horrid one / Beginning with 'Formosum Pastor Corydon'" (*Don Juan*, Canto I: XLII).

What critics fail to grasp is that *Don Juan* is, on one level, a pederastic poem. The eponymous hero, Don Juan, is a teenaged boy, who is the object of erotic desire. He is pursued, but does not pursue. Always others (usually and ostensibly female) take the initiative. The male narrator is clearly in love with him, which is pure narcissism: since *Don Juan* is partly autobiographical, representing Byron as a boy, the love between narrator and hero is self-love; and to compound the matter, Don Juan is in love with himself: "He, on the other hand, if not in love, / Fell into that no less imperious passion, / Self-love. . . ." (Canto IX: LXVIII).

After Byron's death, his memoirs were burned by his publisher and literary executor. Testimony concerning the memoirs, from those who claimed to have read them, is so extremely contradictory that we can

only speculate as to their contents. In my opinion it is entirely possible that they dealt with male love, and included a plea for its emancipation.

MEDWIN AND TRELAWNY

Both Medwin and Trelawny deserve, and in my book will receive, at least a chapter apiece. In brief, Medwin's life was a mess: he was disinherited by his father, and lived the last half of his life in near poverty. Nevertheless, he was a good and prolific writer, a fine classical scholar. His pioneering translations of Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* in particular, have great dramatic power and beauty of language. Medwin wrote the first biographies of both Byron (1824) and Shelley (1843), discreetly hinting the homoerotic tastes of his subjects. He died in 1869, at the age of 81 (Lovell, 1962).

Trelawny wrote two masterpieces of 19th century English literature: his partly autobiographical novel, *Adventures of a Younger Son* (1831), in which male love is expressed with passion and candor, and his *Recollections of Shelley and Byron* (1858), in which he says directly that Shelley and Williams loved each other, and that he loved both of them. When he met and fell in love with Shelley, Trelawny was tall, dark, handsome, and athletic. He kept his looks for the rest of his life. A man who saw him strip for a swim, when he was in his eighties, said he still had a fine, muscular physique. He died in 1881, at the age of 89. His ashes are buried next to Shelley's in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome (Massingham, 1930).

HOGG AND PEACOCK

Although they were outside the Italian Shelley-Byron circle, a few words should be said about Shelley's two best English friends. Thomas Jefferson Hogg was born into a wealthy professional family in 1792. He matriculated at Oxford in 1810, where he soon became Shelley's bosom friend. Though their personalities were complementary, they shared a contempt for superstition and conventional opinion. Hogg's reminiscences of Shelley, written 36 years after his death, are a loving tribute, and include numerous hints as to male love—for example, a decidedly campy episode where a French duke expresses to Hogg his admiration for the "truly charming physiognomy" of the young Shelley, and rec-

ommends: "Eau de Luce should be frequently rubbed on his chest by a soft, warm hand" (Hogg, 1858, p. 499).

Thomas Love Peacock was born in 1785. During Shelley's lifetime, Peacock was a good friend; a mentor, especially in Greek literature; and his literary agent. After Shelley's death, Peacock was the executor of his will. Peacock was a close friend of the philosophers John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. It is interesting that his friends included both the first English writer (Bentham) and the second (Shelley) to discuss sex between males. Peacock is an excellent poet in his own right, judging from his long poem, *Rhododaphne*, and one of the best satirists in the English language. A passage on "Uranian Love" from *Crochet Castle* is not only a marvelous specimen of high camp, but a vigorous assault on sexual prudery. (Later in the 19th century *Uranian* became a favored code word of gay men in England [d'Arch Smith, 1970].)

Good friends of each other, Hogg and Peacock were excellent classical scholars. When Trelawny returned to England, he became friends with both of them. It is significant that Greek references were used for coded communication on gay topics, not only by Byron and his friends (Crompton, 1985), but also by Shelley and his friends. In a letter from Hogg to Shelley of 21 May 1820, we note the phrase, *noctes atticae* ("Attic nights"):

Peacock has lately married, and in my opinion very judiciously; notwithstanding his *various* occupations, we sometimes find time for *noctes atticae*, or long walks. [original emphasis] (Shelley, Ed. 1964)

This is almost certainly related to the phrase, *the Attic Mode*, which Jeremy Bentham and his friends secretly used to refer to male love (Crompton, 2003). Peacock was a personal friend of Bentham, and Hogg was an intimate and lifelong friend of a Bentham protégé and bachelor, Walter Coulson (Scott, 1951). In addition, Hogg and Peacock may have used *Athenian* as a gay code word (Scott, 1943).

In their correspondence Hogg and Shelley used the words *philautia* and *philautian*, both in Greek characters and transliterated, as code words for something (Hogg, 1858, pp. 224, 241). Etymologically, *philautian* can mean both self-lover and lover of his own kind; it is a synonym of sorts for *homophile*, the preferred word of the gay movement from 1950 to 1969. In addition, *philautia* probably relates to John Lyly's novel, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit* (1579), which portrays the romantic male friendship of Euphues and Philautus.

HELLENISM OF THE CIRCLE

All of the men in the Shelley-Byron circle were ardent hellenists. In addition to the translations, essay, and covert language already discussed, Shelley's hellenism was expressed in many of his poems, most notably *Hellas*. The preface to *Hellas* contains the familiar passage:

We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece. But for Greece—Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors, would have spread no illumination with her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters; or, what is worse, might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of social institution as China and Japan possess.

Hellenism also pervades Byron's poetry, most memorably in the paean to Ancient Greece in Canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which contains the famous line: "Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground." Byron spent the last year of his life attempting to aid the Greeks in their fight for independence. He did what he could, though his grisly death in Greece, at the age of 36, came not from combat, but from a combination of excessive dieting, alcoholism, laxatives and medical treatment, which consisted of bleedings (MacCarthy, 2002). Trelawny also fought, and was seriously wounded, in the Greek war.

AFTERMATH

The Shelley-Byron circle in Italy lasted for only half a year, before it was blown apart by the deaths of Shelley and Williams, the departure of Byron and Trelawny to fight for Greek independence, and the death of Byron.

Male love was an important part of their lives and work. They had a serious concern for justice. In the many hours they spent together, they surely must have discussed male love and its emancipation. Could the circle have been a gay think-tank? If so, they would have been forerunners of Heinrich Hössli, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, John Addington Symonds, Sir Richard Burton, Edward Carpenter, the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, and the homophile and gay liberation movements of the 20th century.

No doubt much was lost, through the destruction of letters, manuscripts, and so forth. But some of their efforts may have gone into a Uranian underground, to surface later in the works of others. I now believe that the Shelley-Byron circle, directly or indirectly, was behind *Don Leon*, the first published work in English to argue for abolishing sodomy laws (*Don Leon*, 1934). At any rate, it is now time, as the 21st century begins, to cast off the blinders of theological prejudice and academic correctness; it is time to read the surviving work of these men boldly, to allow their muffled voices finally to be heard.

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