

The Ravenna adventure at Palazzo Guiccioli: Byron's *mythopoiesis* through love and war¹

A peculiar and particularly biased witness of the love affair between Lord Byron and Teresa Gamba Guiccioli is that provided by Alessandro Guiccioli, grandson and namesake of Teresa's husband.² In the family memoirs collected and written by Alessandro (II),³ he narrates with a mixture of strong conservative social attitude and bitter irony the relationship among Teresa, Alessandro (I), and Byron.

An example of the kind of information provided by the family memoirs is a list of 25 'rules' which Alessandro (I) wrote for Teresa after her stay in Venice with Byron in 1819.⁴ Among the rules we find:⁵

1. *She shall not wake up late, neither take too long to do her hair, neither be too fancy when dressing, or when bathing, as that would jeopardize her [health?].*

[...]

10. *She shall receive as few visitors as possible.*

Etc.

To this Teresa replied with a resentful 'counter list' which gives us quite a clear an idea of her temper:⁶

1. *I shall wake up whenever I want.*
2. *I do not discuss about toiletries.*

¹ A repository of updated photographic and archive documentation on Palazzo Guiccioli is currently being assembled. It will be possible to obtain permission to publish such documents in case of publication of the present paper.

² On the affair see now Rees-Cochran 2005; various remarks in Marchand 1949; several archive documents are collected in Graziani 1995 and esp. Mazzeo 2009.

³ Guiccioli 1932, 16 ff. on Teresa's and later Byron's relationships with count Alessandro Guiccioli (I). All translations here provided of the Guiccioli memoirs are ours. On Alessandro Guiccioli (I) see Uccellini 1855, s.v., esp. 236-7; Spreti 1928-35, s.v.; see also Miserocchi 1927, s.v. «Guiccioli Alessandro».

⁴ On Byron in Veneto see, with a wider approach, Dowling 2008; remarks on his works also in Brillì 1988.

⁵ Guiccioli 1932, 28 ff.

⁶ Guiccioli 1932, 32.

Etc.

2a. I shall receive without distinction just any possible visitor.

The rules also regarded 'suggested' living standards, matrimonial duties, and more. No point refer directly to Byron, but it is obvious that Alessandro's list was motivated by Teresa's behaviour.

The Guiccioli memoirs also describe Byron's accommodation in the family palace in 1820.⁷

Thus Byron leaves the hotel and settles down in the Osi palace with four horses, four coaches, six servants, animals of all kind. His bedroom, which we later used as dining room, had painted walls and faced the courtyard, his study where he wrote the Cain, the Marin Faliero, the Sardanapalus, [was] on the front side of the palace, the last room on the right from the street. I had such information from my father and from an old household servant, some Filippo Allegri, who had met «That madman of a Milord!».

It is well known that the locals used to address Byron as «That mad Englishman», due to his lifestyle; this was an affectionate nickname, as he was rather popular among the people. Such popularity was also related, at some point, to Byron's support to the local Carbonari society: he allowed the revolutionaries to meet and store weapons in the basement of the palace itself, as Alessandro II and other sources record. Byron strengthened the bonds with the Gamba family not only through the love with Teresa, but also through the close friendship with her brother Pietro, called Pierino, deeply involved in Carbonari activities. Of the works which Byron wrote in the palace, the *Marin Faliero* is particularly remarkable: the Classense library in Ravenna still preserves an original copy of Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Storia della Repubblica di Venezia*, translated and published in 1768: it is probably the very same copy that Byron declared to read as a source for his tragedy.⁸

⁷ Guiccioli 1932, 35-6.

⁸ The story of *Marin Faliero* is in Laugier 1768, IV, 22 ff.; on the interest of the Classense library in Ravenna for Byron see the catalogue of the 1988 exhibition in Domini 1988.

Towards the end of the second Act of the *Marin Faliero* (scene I) the dialogue between Marino and his wife Angolina seems to conform to the typical approach of an old nobleman to a young lady; then (scene II) one of the conspirators introduces Marino, as their possible leader, by calling him a 'stranger':

ACT II DOGE OF VENICE. 71

To make the enterprise secure, if 'tis
Commenced to-morrow; but, till 'tis begun,
Each hour is pregnant with a thousand perils.

ISRAEL BERTUCCIO.

Let the Sixteen meet at the wonted hour,
Except Soranzo, Nicoletto Blondo,
And Marco Giuda, who will keep their watch
Within the arsenal, and hold all ready,
Expectant of the signal we will fix on.

CALENDARO.

We will not fail.

ISRAEL BERTUCCIO.

Let all the rest be there;
I have a stranger to present to them.

CALENDARO.

A stranger! doth he know the secret?

ISRAEL BERTUCCIO.

Yes.

CALENDARO.

And have you dared to peril your friends' lives
On a rash confidence in one we know not?

ISRAEL BERTUCCIO.

I have risk'd no man's life except my own—
Of that be certain: he is one who may
Make our assurance doubly sure, according
His aid; and if reluctant, he no less
Is in our power: he comes alone with me,
And cannot 'scape us; but he will not swerve.

These elements reflect Byron's situation. The old conspiring Doge addressing the young wife could represent Alessandro with Teresa: Alessandro II cites a report of the Police Director of Venice dated 19 November 1819, proving that the contemporaries thought that the count was somehow tied to the Carbonari, and the Venetian police did keep an eye on him for this. On the other hand, calling Marino a 'stranger' within a local political conspiracy may actually hint to Byron himself, surely a stranger in this sense, as a leader of the Carbonari plots in Ravenna, and this is an example of a literary reworking which Byron forged on the basis of his experience. To the contemporary myth-making of 'Byronism'⁹ we may add

⁹ On this and other related themes see Soderholm 1996; now Zuccato 2004; see also bibliography and paper given at the present conference by M.G. Tigani Sava, «Byronism and the Italian Risorgimento».

this form of idealized self-representation. It may be that Byron somehow wished to use Marin Faliero as an alter-ego of both him and Alessandro through their 'shared' ties to Teresa and their common involvement with the Carbonari: the relationship between Byron and Alessandro seems rather peculiar, from these and other sources: it was possibly a sort of mixed conflict and shared ideologies which produced a form of rivalry and, to some degree, formal respect. The fact that Marino is an aged character possibly featuring traits belonging both to Byron and to Guiccioli could vaguely reflect a small epistolary controversy between the two, which Alessandro (II) cites as an example of the poet's childish attitude: in a letter dated 21 August 1820 Byron writes to Alessandro:¹⁰

«I have been informed that in a letter you wrote in Rome on June 24 1820, you called me 'a 35 years old man' in 1819, which would make me 36 at present. Now I am very surprised that [...] you missed that my birth in 1788 rather makes me thirty-two years old. I wish to thank you for the five years you have generously granted to me, but I must inform you that I find it impossible to accept them [...]. If ever I, writing a record of your story, would make you a 70 years old man, by adding you just a seventh of your age, I think you would not appreciate it».

Alessandro calls the family household 'Osi palace', as it was built, probably during the 16th century, by the Osio family, a house originally of Milan, well known for their lavish parties.¹¹ On April 12th, 1802, Giovanni Francesco Osio, last member of the family, sold the palace to the Guiccioli, an important family from Imola, documented from at least the 12th century, and Alessandro Guiccioli moved to the palace, along with Teresa after 1818.¹²

¹⁰ Guiccioli 1932, 37-8.

¹¹ On the Osio family see Uccellini 1855, s.v. «Osii»; Spreti 1928-35, s.v. «Osio».

¹² The deed of sale is in Archivio di Stato di Ravenna [ASRa], Arch. notarile distr.le Ravenna, vol. 2002, 45-9. Later inheritances, sales or assignments within or between the same families in the 19th and early 20th centuries are in ASRa, cadastral number 225: Archivio notarile di Ravenna, Atti Vecchio Catasto fabbricati, reg. 2462, 1035 and reg. 10, 1733; reg. 10, 1860/2 and reg. 8 ter, 1049/5; reg. 66, 1353; reg. 74, 3615; reg. 76, 3943; reg. 88, 7950; reg. 104, 11267 and reg. 93, 5108. A few remarks on the history of the palace are in Savini 1905-7, II, 9-10; Ricci 1923, 27-8 s.v. «Comando della Divisione militare»; Foschi 2001, esp. 206-9.

The palace is made of several buildings placed around a 'noble' inner courtyard on the north wing, and a service area in the south. It was left by Alessandro to his son Ignazio in 1824, and later sold to the Rasponi family in 1843. The palace housed for a short time Luigi Carlo Farini, later a protagonist of the Italian Risorgimento, and the national hero Giuseppe Garibaldi. Its ownership was exchanged several times between the same Guiccioli and Rasponi families, until it was acquired in 1921 by the Italian State, which turned it into military headquarters. Through the 20th century the palace was dramatically modified, disfigured and spoiled. In 1990 the Comune of Ravenna acquired it, but in the subsequent years the palace was almost completely abandoned and further decayed.¹³

The main façade of the north wing is built on a main street and is by far the most ancient part of the building, dating almost completely to the Osio family and the 16th century. The marble portal and balcony probably date to the 17th or 18th century. It is pretty obvious that the façade is asymmetrical, featuring only 1 window on the right of the portal, but 4 windows on the left side. The main portal leads to an entrance hall from which side stairs lead to the upper floors, while a door gives access to the inner courtyard. The area is now abandoned, and the courtyard houses buildings which were added probably not earlier than the 19th century.

The paintings in the noble floor are partially preserved and show several layers of subsequent decorations. An important phase is that assigned to the school of Felice Giani, an artist from Faenza who lived 1758-1823.¹⁴ Judging from the words of Alessandro (II), quoted above, Byron occupied this side of the noble floor. A preliminary chemical-physical survey has been carried out on the paintings of the nearby rooms D and E: these include a synthetic pigment called copper arsenate, patented in 1778 and progressively abandoned from 1814, which brings us to the time of the Guiccioli and later Byron. We may also recall that in Alessandro's memories, as quoted by his grandson, it seems that he and Teresa had some not exactly idyllic discussions about the decorations and furniture of the palace, as she apparently asked for improvements.

¹³ Ministero per i Beni culturali e ambientali, prot. 15152 dated 15.11.82; cf. Soprintendenza per i Beni architettonici e paesaggistici per le Province di Ravenna, Ferrara, Forlì-Cesena, Rimini, Archivio pratiche, prot. 8870 dated 03.12.82.

¹⁴ On Giani see Vitali 2003, 35-61.

Further analysis of the decorations and rooms of the palace are currently under way, and will soon move to the alleged Byron's rooms. We also have collected words from the descendants of a branch of the Rasponi family, last owners of the palace, that early 19th century furniture from the palace has been moved, after 1921, to their own private family castle in S. Arcangelo di Romagna, close to Rimini. Another part of the belongings of the Guiccioli family may have been moved in the 'De Asarta' estate in the area of Udine, where countess Margherita de Asarta, last heir of the Guiccioli, used to live in the Fifties of the XX century. An original and apparently late 18th or early 19th century piano from the palace has been sold by the Rasponi to a private collector from Ravenna who claims that Byron used to play such piano during his stay. Local institutions and foundations are currently funding the scientific research and restoration of the palace: the Guiccioli Palace project, launched in 2012, plans to further study these fragments of the building's history, recollect them, and employ them in the design of a planned museum on Byron and the Risorgimento, to be housed in the Guiccioli palace itself, which will be bought back to its early 19th century appearance. The Interdepartmental Centre for Industrial Research on Buildings and Construction Technologies (CIRI EC), unit of Recovery & Restoration, based in the Department of Cultural heritage in Ravenna, has cooperated to the project through both an archive historical research and laboratory analysis of the building materials and decorations, of which we have presented here the preliminary results.

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