

**LITERARY ALLUSION IN BYRON'S WRITINGS OF
THE MEDITERRANEAN TOUR (1809-1811):
AN INTRODUCTION**
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In November 1807 young Byron, who had not yet turned twenty, put together a list of the works he had read up to that time. There he famously claimed to have read “above four thousand novels, including the works of Cervantes, Fielding, Smollett, Richardson, Mackenzie, Sterne, Rabelais and Rousseau, etc. etc.” plus an impressive number of “different poets, dramatic or otherwise” and an equally huge number of “historical writers”, as he calls them, “in different languages.”¹ A couple of months later, in January 1808, he added that “of the Classics I know about as much as most school-boys after a Discipline of thirteen years” and also that his reading had been “tolerably extensive in the historical department.”² Finally, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, published in March 1809, is among other things a defence of contemporary poets like Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell whom Byron claims to know well.

To what extent is all this true? Was young Byron really well-read? Opinions have varied to the point of contradiction, even when expressed by the same person: “Certainly he did *not* read these books”, wrote Hobhouse about the famous reading list. But he was more tentative on another occasion: “I am inclined to believe the fact” [that Byron had read the books]. And yet another time he seems to strike a balance: “I am afraid *that* is not true to the extent which Byron would wish us all to believe.”³ In the absence of direct evidence, an arguably valid way to determine the degree of truth in Byron’s statements about his early literary knowledge is to analyze, in this light, his own writings about the Mediterranean and Levant tour between July 1809 and July 1811. On the one hand, Byron set off on his tour when he was twenty-one and the statements about his breadth of reading were still recent. On the other hand, books and newspapers were not easily available to him during the two-year Levant experience. While we know that he bought some books for the occasion, he often complains in his letters about his present scarcity or sheer lack of reading material, and begs his mother to take good care of his Newstead library for him.⁴ Besides, the letters, the trivia and even the occasional poems that he wrote during his tour are in most cases highly spontaneous and not meant for publication. As a consequence, literary allusions and references to books and writers as made in his texts of the period are bound to bear the hallmark of authenticity. My aim therefore has been to identify, explain and analyze, in as comprehensive a way as possible, allusions and references to literary authors and works in the 92 letters, 28 poems and seven trivia (some 40,000 words in all) which Byron put together during his Mediterranean tour.⁵ This was not an easy task. Some of the literary references are fairly straightforward, with Byron giving the name of the author or the work (normally simplified), or providing a well-known quotation, but this is not the norm. In most cases, allusion is indirect, playful, and answerable to a code (sometimes, the gay code) shared by addresser and addressee only, or almost only. Naturally, editors of the material dealt with here (most notably Prothero⁶ and Marchand for the letters, McGann for the poems and Nicholson for the trivia) have identified some of the alluded texts (or *spurs*, as they are technically called) but it is only fair to say that

1: CMP 1-7. This paper, which is related to the Spanish I+D+i National Research Project MCI FFI2011-23532, is meant to be a provisional summary of a much more detailed study (forthcoming) on the same topic. While it has benefited from readings by Alicia Laspra and John Jones, and comments by several academic colleagues, responsibility for the final product naturally rests with me.

2: BLJ I 147-48.

3: CMP 255.

4: See BLJ II 3-4, BLJ II 36-8, BLJ XI 177 etc.

5: These writings were for the first time combined and made into a unified corpus (in Spanish translation) by Coletes ed. and trans. (2010).

6: Prothero (1898-1901), the main Victorian editor of Byron’s prose works, bowdlerized Byron extensively, which is why his Byron edition should be consulted with the utmost care (see Coletes 2012).

my own detective work has been extensive. I am of course aware of its shortcomings. I may have missed a number of allusions. Some of the alluding texts (or *reprises*, as they are technically called) may refer to more than one spur. Finally, some of the identifications must necessarily be tentative or general. But even allowing for these limitations, evidence towards knowing more about young Byron and his readings is, I think, quite conclusive after having scrutinized the Levant tour texts in this light.⁷

Overall figures indicate first of all that literary allusion and reference is found in 53 out of the 127 Byron texts that make up the corpus; that is, in a good 41.7% of them. There are, moreover, as many as 135 cases of allusion, which means that the reprises often go together, grouped into clusters within the same text. There seems to be something close to a pattern of reprise distribution, manifesting as a combination of topic and interlocutor. There is significantly no reprise in the letters to Hanson, 25 in all and, as such, the most numerous sub-group in the corpus. These are business letters to the family lawyer, a man whose relation with Byron was quickly deteriorating; therefore, of a nature not at all prone to literary allusion. On the contrary, letters to friends on more informal matters are full of such devices: there are nine cases of allusion in one single letter to Henry Drury, four or five in each of several letters to Hobhouse, and five in the short playful poem “My Epitaph”, to name but a few. Allusion in letters to his mother is not to be overlooked. We find it in eight of the 17 letters that he wrote to her, conspicuously including one sent from Constantinople where six spurs are found. If allusion implies shared knowledge and values, complicity and, in Byron’s case, a sense of humour, the relationship between mother and son was clearly not so bad as has generally been claimed, at least during this period.

As is natural, the 135 cases of allusions found do not correspond to exactly the same number of different spurs, the actual figure of the latter being a good deal lower, 96 precisely. This means that we often get variants of the same spur. For instance, a quotation from Petronius’ *Satyricon*, used as a homosexual code, is repeated with variations four times in the corpus, and of course there are favourite authors, with Shakespeare claiming a conspicuous nine reprises. In fact, literary allusion and reference in Byron’s texts of the Levant tour falls quite naturally into several groups. In increasing order of importance, I have distinguished six such groups and labelled them as follows:

- The Bible
- Foreign Authors
- Traditional Songs
- Contemporary English Authors
- Ancient Classics
- Past English Writers and Classics

Allusions to the Bible are a rarity in the corpus. Besides, the three reprises we find (related to Ephesians, Deuteronomy and Mark’s Gospel respectively) are more cultural and even humorous in nature than truly religious, which shows us the truth of the bold statement Byron had made in the selfsame 1807 reading list: “I abhor Religion, though I reverence & love my God.”⁸

Foreign authors are also scarce and not particularly significant in the corpus. Cervantes’ story of ‘the curious impertinent’ might be behind a reference to the story of Lothario, the seducer of women, and, in fact, *Don Quixote* is mentioned in the 1807 reading list, but Rowe’s *Fair Penitent* is a more likely spur. The French thinker La Rochefoucauld, not mentioned in the list, is the object of one allusion. Finally, a reference to Rigas Feraios, the Greek leader one of whose poems Byron was translating, plus a story about Meletius of Janina’s *Ancient and Modern Geography* close this second and likewise modest section. Naturally, it is not to be expected that young Byron should mention in his Levant writing the many foreign authors which he includes in his famous 1807 reading list. However, the gap between his claims in the reading list and the actual number of allusions in these texts is somewhat striking.

7: Spurs, reprises: For these and other technical terms in the field of allusion studies, see Abrams (1957), Bologne (1989), Hebel (1991), Pasco (1994), Irwin (2001), Machacek (2007), Coletes (2009) and Sell (2010).

8: CMP 6.

Evidence becomes relatively more copious when it comes to the traditional songs, a group not foreseeable in principle, but which in fact turns out to include 10 references. An aspect maybe less-well attended than others among Byron scholars, the young lord seems to be familiar with a number of traditional English songs, namely “Lillibulero”, “Over the hills and far away”, “The income tax”, “The Jolly Miller” and the then fairly recent “Vive l’amour, vive la compagnie!”, which is the French refrain of an English drinking song. To these spurs, turned into playful and humorous reprises in all cases, must be added the two traditional Greek songs, *Ἀγάπη δεν ἔσταθη ποτε χωρις καιμους* and *Μπένω μεσ’ το περιβόλι*, ‘Ωραιοτάτη Χαηδή, which the young Byron, increasingly sympathetic towards the Greek people and folklore, translates into English soon before sailing back to Britain.

From a present-day perspective, Walter Scott, Wordsworth or Sheridan are classics of English literature in the same way as Byron himself is. When in the texts that make up our corpus the young lord made allusion to these writers, and others of his own or the preceding generation, he was naturally doing so as an insider, considering them from the point of view of a young fellow-writer, which is the reason why I have organised them as a separate group. This is indeed the first significant sub-set in the corpus, with a solid 32 allusions in all. Authors include friends, acquaintances or second-rank writers more or less belonging to his circle, such as Joseph Blackett, Robert Bland, John Carr, Robert Dallas, John Galt, William Gell, Francis Hodgson, Isaac Jackman, Alexander Mackenzie, Waller Rodwell Wright and of course John Cam Hobhouse, whose then recent *Imitations and Translations from the Ancient and Modern Classics, together with Original Poems never before published* is mentioned by Byron, while ostensibly not taking it in any serious way, as many as seven times in the corpus. There are also allusions to works which were very popular at the time, such as Beckford’s influential *Vathek*, Colman’s curious *Bluebeard, or Female Curiosity*, De Salvo’s thrilling account of “*the Liberation of Mrs. Spencer Smith, from the Hands of the French Police*”, or Peter Pindar’s satirical *Progress of Curiosity; or, A Royal Visit to Whitbread’s Brewery*.

Of particular interest from our point of view are, finally, allusions made to works of contemporaries who, like Byron himself, have become mainstream classics. These include Richard Brinsley Sheridan (*The Rivals* and *The Critic*), Walter Scott (*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Lady of the Lake* and *Marmion*), William Wordsworth (the poems “Goody Blake and Harry Gill: A True Story” and “We are seven”) and, possibly, Samuel T. Coleridge (the epigram “Say What You Will, Ingenious Youth!”, though other spurs are plausible). A number of these allusions are referential in nature while others fulfil more complex functions, such as adding a cultural connotation to the text, comparing life and literature, or showing slight disparagement towards the author, all of which is more often than not expressed in humorous tones, even parodic at times. Allusions to works by Sheridan and Scott are positive in tone, which is hardly surprising. In 1807 Byron had considered Sheridan one of the “great names” in the writing trade.⁹ As for Scott, whom he had abused in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, a change of attitude is apparent since at least 1810, when in one of the Levant letters the young lord actually considers him “the best” of the British writers then active.¹⁰ Somewhat more surprising is the fact that Byron quotes from Wordsworth’s works twice and in a positive or at least neutral tone which shows knowledge and appreciation of an author he had apparently never held in high esteem. “English living poets I have avoided mentioning, we have none who will [not] survive their productions. Taste is over with us,” he had written in the 1807 reading list.¹¹ As can be seen, literary allusion to contemporary fellow-writers in the 1809-11 corpus is not totally consistent with such an adverse judgment.

Ancient classics constitute the second most important sub-set in the corpus. It boasts as many as 38 cases of allusion, six more than the preceding group. Several factors contribute towards this evident wealth. The first is Byron’s own educational background, largely based, as was common then, on achieving a fairly good acquaintance with the Graeco-Roman writers “after a discipline of thirteen years” as he himself had written.¹² The second is his own enthusiasm for ancient Greece. His Levant experience

9: CMP 6.

10: BLJ II 21-3.

11: CMP 3.

12: CMP 2.

really starts in earnest the moment he puts his foot on Greek territory and almost immediately sets off on an apparently never-ending series of comings and goings mostly in search of all the mythical names associated with the ancient Levant, from Athens and Thebes to Constantinople and the Hellespont without forgetting Ephesus or Troy, to name but a few. The third reason, maybe less expected, is homosexuality. A common fact of life in the Greek and Roman world, Byron often makes use of literary allusion to the classics as a gay code, only to be used when writing to very close friends such as Charles Skinner Matthews, the most conspicuous homosexual of his Cambridge set, or to John Cam Hobhouse, who was probably homosexual or bisexual as well.¹³

The 38 cases of allusion to the ancient classics as identified in the corpus refer to five or arguably six Greek authors plus another seven Roman authors and a quotation of the traditional valediction in Roman drama which can refer back to any such plays. This naturally implies that different works of the same author are often alluded to. In effect, Aeschylus' *The Persians* is alluded to four times, Euripides is the spur for two reprises (based on *Medea* and *Phoenician Women* respectively) and Homer takes pride of place with one reference to the *Odyssey* and as many as six allusions to the *Iliad*, either in general or to specific lines. Finally, there may be an allusion associated to the Pseudo-Aeschines' *Letters* as well. As for the Roman authors, Cicero's *De Officiis*, Lucan's *Pharsalia* and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* are each alluded to once. Petronius' *Satyricon*, used as a part of the gay code, is alluded to four times. Finally, Ovid, Virgil and Horace, in increasing order of importance, are clearly the young lord's favourite Roman authors. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is used once as a spur, and his *Heroides*, in direct connexion with the Hero and Leander story which was so important for Byron, six times. But it is Horace who really stands out from the rest. His fourth *Satire* is used once as a spur, the same as the first and third of the *Epistles*. To this must be added *Ars Poetica* (*Epistula ad Pisones*), four times used as a spur, and the *Odes*, with different passages from the first, the third and the fourth books being used as spurs on different occasions. Byron's classical allusions have a definite stylistic profile. Many of them are humorous, but this is not their exclusive feature. What is distinctive, apart from the use of some of them as a homosexual code, is that their predominant function consists in drawing parallels between life and myth. As noted by some critics, one of the aims of Byron's first Mediterranean experience was to create his own contemporary myth by embodying the ancient Graeco-Roman myths in himself.¹⁴ This is why he was so keen on swimming across the Hellespont from Sestos to Abydos, thus re-creating the myth of Hero and Leander, or on climbing up and sitting on the Cyanean Rocks as a tribute to Jason and the Argonauts, two initiatives which in turn yielded several literary allusions to the classics in our corpus. In any case, literary allusions to the ancient Greek and Roman authors as found in these letters do ring the bell of authenticity. Of the authors identified in the Levant corpus, Aeschylus, Euripides, Homer, Horace, Lucan, Ovid and Virgil were mentioned in the 1807 reading list, together with several others who are absent from the letters but could surely have been used by Byron, a young man undoubtedly well-versed in the classics, as sources for yet other interesting reprises.

Finally, we come to the sixth and most important of our groups, English past writers and classics. Here we find 48 cases of allusion; that is, ten more than in the ancient classics group. Since in some cases one reprise may refer to more than one spur, the said 48 cases correspond to a number of works oscillating between 37 and 40, and a number of authors between 21 and 24. The distribution is therefore not quite the same as in the ancient classics group. What we found there was a relatively short number of authors but a relatively large number of associated works. Here, on the contrary, the ratio work-author is more balanced, indicating that Byron has a good knowledge not only of a fairly large number of English past authors but also of a variety of their respective works. This in turn means that in this group we find a much lower number of repetitions or variations of the same spur.

The best example is undoubtedly Shakespeare. In our corpus there are nine Shakespeare allusions which correspond to as many as eight different plays (to wit, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, *Henry V*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*). It must be added that, in common with other authors and works in this group, the Shakespeare reprises are quite specific, so that we can in

13: See Coletes 2012: 95-6.

14: See for instance Borst (1948: 113-15) or Saglia (2009: 54-7) among others.

all cases identify the play, act, scene and line or lines they refer to. The swan of Avon does indeed take pride of place in this group, both in quantity and in variety of allusions. The second most important author in the group is Alexander Pope, which is hardly surprising, as all Byron students know. Byron admired and tried to emulate Pope ever since he became acquainted with his works as a young student in Harrow. Similarly to Shakespeare's case, five different works by Pope are used eight times as spurs. The works in question are "Lines occasioned by some verses of His Grace the Duke of Buckingham", "Eloisa to Abelard", "An Essay on Man", "Epistle to Cobham" and "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot." Each of the last three is used as a spur twice, not just as references but paraphrasing or quoting different passages, which points to young Byron's excellent knowledge of his avowed master in the art of satire. The third author in order of importance is Oliver Goldsmith. Here we find allusions to *The Citizen of the World*, *The Good-Natured Man*, *The Traveller* (one reprise each) and *The Vicar of Wakefield* (two reprises). As in the cases of Pope and Shakespeare, these are very genuine spurs since, on scrutiny, we can identify the specific passages and even the words that Byron eventually targeted as literary reprises. This comes as a relative surprise. Byron had naturally included Shakespeare and Pope in his 1807 reading list among those "who have distinguished their language by their productions."¹⁵ However, Goldsmith is ranked together with Gray, Collins and Thompson among the "minor poets" who, as he points out patronizingly, "might have been added as worth of mention in a *Cosmopolite* account."¹⁶ In the fourth place we find Henry Fielding. *Joseph Andrews* is used as a spur once and *The Tragedy of Tragedies: Or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*, which Byron probably knew through the stage adaptation of Kane O'Hara, three times. As quoted at the beginning of this paper, Byron had included Fielding's among the "more than four thousand novels" he claimed to have read. An author that he clearly liked, reprises based on Fielding are always humorous, one of them actually being used as a light-hearted closing to a letter. Jonathan Swift, mentioned in the 1807 list as "a History in Himself,"¹⁷ is used as a spur twice in connection with his 'Vive la Bagatelle' motto as expressed in his *Letters*. Years later, Byron would refer in *Don Juan* to Constantinople as presenting "the very view / Which charm'd the charming Montagu" (V:3). When he first visits the city in 1810 he clearly does so with Lady Mary's Turkish embassy letters in his hand, or in his head, alluding to three of them – mostly in order to disagree with Montagu's opinions. A quotation from Milton's *Comus* closes the allusions to those English authors that, perhaps with the exception of Montagu, Byron himself considered, like us, classics of the language.

But there remains of course a wealth of other past English authors and works, used as spurs normally once and exceptionally two or three times. Reprises here allude to four different playwrights (Foote, Jackman, Ruggle and Villers) with one play each, plus a reference to *The Lancashire Witches* whose spur may be one or several among Didbin's, Heywood's or Shadwell's homonymous plays. Poetry is represented by Warton's *Progress of Discontent*, satire by Churchill's *Apology*, essay by Walsh's Preface to the Pastorals (mentioned twice) and eloquence by Henley's *Oratory Transactions*, mentioned three times. None of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, however, is included in the 1807 list, nor is Canon's *Ancient and Modern Pederasty*, a cult book for the homosexual which Byron uses once as a particularly funny spur.¹⁸ As for 'historical writers', as he calls them in the list, Thomas Sheridan's *Life of Dr Swift* is a spur in the corpus and so is Gibbon, who was mentioned in the list and whose *History of Constantinople* is likewise alluded to in a letter. Stylistically speaking this English past writers and classics group is quite interesting. The vast majority of their associated reprises are not simply learned references to the author, genre, characters or other non-textual features of the spur but phraseological adaptations or literal quotations (sometimes showing slight differences with the original) of the spur text. They fulfill a variety of functions, including phatic or expressive ones, but for the most part they are meant to add a cultural-literary dimension to Byron's own activity in the Mediterranean, all of which points to his genuine knowledge of a handful of English old masters (such as Shakespeare, Pope,

15: CMP 1.

16: CMP 3.

17: CMP 1.

18: BLJ I 208.

Goldsmith, Fielding, Swift, Montagu or Milton) whose words he convincingly absorbs into his own writing.

In conclusion, was young Byron well read? The answer is definitely – yes indeed. The 1807 list is of course not to be taken *ad pedem litterae* but as the work of a vivacious cub writer – that is, mostly as fiction, a pose, a metaphor after all. The young lord had exaggerated his literary prowess, but genuine familiarity with the Graeco-Roman classics, the English ‘great tradition’ and an interesting handful of contemporary authors does show up candidly in the Levant writings – together with a remarkable facility for retentive and a quick emotional response which, through the workings of allusion, would often transform readings into artistry.

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