

BYRON AND BULLFIGHTING
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Byron's satire of chivalry in *Childe Harold* Cantos I and II – particularly in the 'Iberian' stanzas – has been much commented upon. In my paper today I want to discuss this aspect of *Childe Harold*, and its anti-Burkean framework, in relation particularly to Byron's description of the bullfight he attended near Cadiz in July 1809.

In late 1812 Byron published an 'Addition' to the Preface of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In it he commented on the supposedly 'unknightly' character of his protagonist Harold by taking issue with Edmund Burke's famous defence of chivalry in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790.

Burke had used mediaevalism, the Gothic and chivalry to characterize what he felt would be lost by Europe if French revolutionary ideas were victorious. Byron in contrast claimed that 'the good old times ... were the most profligate of all possible centuries', and that the 'very indifferent character of the vagrant Childe' was entirely consistent with them. 'The vows of chivalry were no better kept than any other vows whatsoever', Byron continued, 'and the songs of the Troubadours were not more decent, and certainly were much less refined, than those of Ovid'. 'So much for chivalry', he concluded, adding with heavy irony: 'Burke need not have regretted that its days were over, though Maria Antoinette was quite as chaste as most of those in whose honours lances were shivered, and knights unhorsed.'

These comments indicate how, in the poem itself, Byron deploys romance, chivalry and nostalgic conservatism in a satirical mode to point up the horrors of the Napoleonic war that was ravaging the Iberian peninsular in 1809, and to explore the behaviour and role of women in a foreign, specifically southern, society and during war-time. His description of the bullfight focuses attention on these issues through a scene which is a microcosm of war and of a society at war, using the enclosed bullring as synecdoche for the wider field of combat.

Byron introduces the bullfight as if it were a chivalric tournament, with an intensification of the mock-Spenserian language he uses throughout the poem:

The lists are op'd, the spacious area clear'd,
 Thousands on thousands pil'd are seated round;
 Long ere the first loud trumpet's note is heard,
 Ne vacant space for lated wight is found: ...

Hush'd is the din of tongues – on gallant steeds
 With milk-white crest, gold spur, and light-pois'd lance,
 Four cavaliers prepare for venturous deeds,
 And lowly bending to the lists advance;
 Rich are their scarfs, their chargers featly prance:
 If in the dangerous game they shine to-day,
 The crowd's loud shout and ladies' lovely glance,
 Best prize of better acts, they bear away,
 And all that kings or chiefs e'er gain their toils repay.¹

In stanza 81 Byron evokes the carefree pleasures of Latin culture:

1: CHP I ll.720-3 and 729-37.

Who late so free as Spanish girls were seen,
 (Ere war uprose in his volcanic rage),
 With braided tresses bounding o'er the green,
 While on the gay dance shone Night's lover-loving Queen?²

However, the ambiguous use of the term 'free' to describe the Spanish girls, and the presence of the moon as a presiding 'lover-loving' goddess, also points to the parody with which Byron treats the ladies of chivalry. The association of southern, hotter climates, Latin culture and Roman Catholicism with sensuality and passion – especially female passion – is a topic which was commonly referred to by British writers. Primed by Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (published in 1748), northern European men travelled to the south ready to find female sensuality, and to Spain in particular primed with expectations of a continuing, though debased, chivalric romanticism, and they generally found what they sought.

Sir John Carr, for example, who was in Cadiz at the same time as Byron, observed:

The insensibility of that man must be great indeed, who cannot find a querida, or one to whom he is permitted to devote all his soul, amongst either the married or the unmarried; and destitute of every attraction must that woman be, who does not meet with a cortija or lover, or rather her impassioned slave, amongst the men. In carrying on an intrigue, the Spanish ladies are singularly dexterous. Wrapped up in the masquerade of fable and parable, they carry on an amorous conversation with their admirers in public, without fear of detection.³

The mature Byron went on to treat the subject in Canto I of *Don Juan* with the assurance of irony:

What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,
 Is much more common where the climate's sultry.⁴

And by the time he was writing to Hobhouse from Ravenna in July 1821 to explain (somewhat defensively) why at the request of Teresa Guiccioli he had left off writing *Don Juan*, he had elaborated a theory about the relationship between chivalry and sexuality well suited to his own purposes. Included in that theory is a contrast between a Burkean admiration for the Gothic and Byron's clear preference for classicism and Hellenism.

Teresa had read the French translation of *Don Juan*, Byron wrote

... and thinks it a detestable production. – This will not seem strange even in the Italian morality – because women all over the world always retain their Free masonry – and as that consists in the illusion of the Sentiment – which constitutes their sole empire – (all owing to Chivalry – & the Goths – the Greeks knew better) all works which refer to the *comedy* of the passions – & laugh at Sentimentalism, of course are proscribed by the whole *Sect*.⁵

In *Childe Harold I*, however, the subject of southern female sexuality is still approached by the younger Byron with some shock and fascination. The city of Cadiz or 'Cadies' (then pronounced by English-speakers in a way which made it rhyme with 'ladies') is presented as ruled over by the goddess of love, who has supplanted even the supposedly lax ways of Roman Catholicism in her worship:

But Cadiz, rising on the distant coast,
 Calls forth a sweeter, though ignoble praise.
 Ah, Vice! how soft are thy voluptuous ways!
 While boyish blood is mantling, who can 'scape
 The fascination of thy magic gaze? ...

When Paphos fell by Time – accursed Time!
 The queen who conquers all must yield to thee –
 The Pleasures fled, but sought as warm a clime;
 And Venus, constant to her native sea,
 To nought else constant, hither deign'd to flee;
 And fix'd her shrine within these walls of white:

2: Ibid ll.806-9.

3: Sir John Carr, *Descriptive Travels in the Southern and Eastern Parts of Spain and the Balearic Islands* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1811), p.10.

4: DJ I ll.503-4.

5: Byron to Hobhouse, July 6th 1821: BLJ VIII 148.

Though not to one dome circumscribeth she
Her worship, but, devoted to her rite,
A thousand altars rise, for ever blazing bright.⁶

It is within this dominion of Venus that the bullfight is placed, presided over by women:

Here dons, grandees, but chiefly dames abound,
Skill'd in the ogle of a roguish eye,
Yet ever well inclin'd to heal the wound;
None through their cold disdain are doom'd to die
As moon-struck bards complain, by Love's sad archery.

The throng'd Arena shakes with shouts for more;
Yells the mad crowd o'er entrails freshly torn,
Nor shrinks the female eye, nor ev'n affects to mourn.⁷

Two of Byron's English-speaking companions at the bullfight expressed a similar mixture of repulsion and fascination about women's enthusiastic participation in the sport as spectators. Sir John Carr titillates his readers' interest by describing the level of excitement raised when a young marquis, who had 'already won several ladies' hearts by his beauty, and his prowess' joined the matadors in the ring: "Oh what merit has that fine young nobleman," said a pretty Spanish lady, "how beautifully did he kill the bull!"

Carr is perhaps deliberately unclear about whether the glamour and sexual interest in the sport is generated by the human or the animal participants – by the skill or by the slaughter – when he records how the bulls are also lavishly rewarded with female attention: 'The governor's daughter had honoured the beast by making with her own delicate hands, a rich decoration of ribbons for his neck, and lovely women applauded the bloody havoc which he made'; or when he knowingly remarks how 'every Spanish lady is as well acquainted with all the fine points of a bull, as an English one is of those of a lap-dog'.

Byron's travelling companion Hobhouse described in a note to *Childe Harold IV* in 1818, how:

The wounds and death of the horses are accompanied with the loudest acclamations, and many gestures of delight, especially from the female portion of the audience, including those of the gentlest blood. Everything depends on habit. ... A gentleman present, observing [us] shudder and look pale, noticed that unusual reception of so delightful a sport to some young ladies, who stared and smiled, and continued their applause as another horse fell bleeding to the ground. ... An Englishman who can be much pleased with seeing two men beat themselves to pieces, cannot bear to look at a horse galloping round an arena with his bowels trailing on the ground, and turns from the spectacle and the spectators with horror and disgust.⁸

As Hobhouse points out, the sufferings of horses might actually be more painful to British spectators than injuries to men. Byron's description of the bullfight also draws special attention to the bond between horse and rider: valorizing the animal in terms of the service it renders to its human 'lord':

Alas! too oft condemn'd for him to bear and bleed.

One gallant steed is stretch'd a mangled corse;
Another, hideous sight! unseam'd appears,
His gory chest unveils life's panting source,
Tho' death-struck still his feeble frame he rears,
Staggering, but stemming all, his lord unharm'd he bears.⁹

Byron's description of the death of the horses and the bull are similar narratives of human inhumanity to those which he heard from the advocates of the anti-cruelty measures in Parliament:

Foil'd, bleeding, breathless, furious to the last,
Full in the centre stands the bull at bay,

6: CHP I ll.666-74.

7: CHP I ll.724-8 and 690-2.

8: CPW II 258-9.

9: CHP I ll.746 and 769-73.

Mid wounds, and clinging darts, and lances brast,
 And foes disabled in the brutal fray;
 And now the Matadores round him play,
 Shake the red cloak, and poise the ready brand:
 Once more through all he bursts his thundering way –
 Vain rage! the mantle quits the conyng hand,
 Wraps his fierce eye – 'tis past – he sinks upon the sand!

Where his vast neck just mingles with the spine,
 Sheath'd in his form the deadly weapon lies.
 He stops – he starts – disdainingly to decline:
 Slowly he falls, amidst triumphant cries,
 Without a groan, without a struggle dies.¹⁰

What Byron does, though, is to make the bull the hero of the scene. The reader's sympathy for him is called forth not by pity or sensibility, as in the parliamentarians' accounts, but by admiration for the bull's courage and dignity. In the setting of the Peninsular War it is perhaps *only* animals which can stand outside the blood-guilt which disfigures every human hand. 'I want a hero,' Byron claims at the opening of *Don Juan*, going on to detail why the Napoleonic wars have not provided the kind of hero he needs.

In the bullfight stanzas Byron reverses the scenes of chivalric romance where the human hero must fight a dragon to prove himself and win his lady, so that it is the bull's valour, rather than that of his human opponents, which is heroic.

This scene foreshadows the 'dying gladiator' stanzas in *Childe Harold IV*, with their concentration on the sufferings of a lone, isolated figure.

I see before me the Gladiator lie:
 He leans upon his hand – his manly brow
 Consents to death, but conquers agony,
 And his drooped head sinks gradually low –
 And through his side the last drops, ebbing slow
 From the red gash, fall heavy, one by one,
 Like the first of a thunder-shower; and now
 The arena swims around him – he is gone,
 Ere ceased the inhuman shout which hail'd the wretch who won.¹¹

The gladiator is, of course, a creature of Byron's imagination, based upon a sculpture in the Capitoline museum, and it appears that the bull's death-scene is a similar fiction since, judging by Carr's and Hobhouse's accounts, it seems unlikely that Byron actually saw a bull die in the fight they attended on 30 July 1809. The spectacle instead consisted in a very fierce and experienced bull, apparently belonging to a priest, killing several horses with its horns. As with the gladiator's, so the bull's death is played out as a scene in Byron's imagination. The poet focuses in on small details which encourage the reader to identify with the bull imaginatively and in terms of feeling:

He flies, he wheels, distracted with his throes;
 Dart follows dart; lance, lance; loud bellowings speak his woes.¹²

When the dagger enters the bull's body, we are told precisely at which spot – 'Where his vast neck just mingles with the spine' – and the pinching out of the vowels towards the end of the line seems to concentrate the sensation so that, like the bull, the reader might sense the sharp point entering the nape of the neck.

The animal protection parliamentarians frequently made the point that cruelty to animals degrades human beings, and this is a mainspring of Byron's argument. The bullfight is a microcosm for a country at war in two distinct ways. First, it illustrates how human beings are made cruel towards each other by practising and watching cruelty to animals, as the bullfighting cult deliberately trains up Spaniards of both sexes for bloodshed:

10: CHP I ll.774-82.

11: CHP IV ll.1252-60.

12: CHP I ll.763-4.

Such the ungentle sport that oft invites
 The Spanish maid, and cheers the Spanish swain.
 Nurtur'd in blood betimes, his heart delights
 In vengeance, gloating on another's pain.¹³

Stanza 80 goes on to claim that such sports actually undermine the Spaniards' ability to fight effectively for their country, because the bloodthirstiness induced by participation in blood-sports is turned into local feuding instead of united and effective opposition to the Napoleonic invasion of the country:

What private feuds the troubled village stain?
 Though now one phalanx'd host should meet the foe,
 Enough, alas! in humble homes remain,
 To meditate 'gainst friends the secret blow,
 For some slight cause of wrath, whence life's warm stream must flow.¹⁴

The second means by which the bullfight scene works to characterize a country at war lies in the way human beings actively disguise from themselves the reality of slaughter by the chivalric glamour they cast over bloodshed. In the bullring the animals' lack of guilt throws this into relief. The bull is innocent – despite the deaths he causes and the injuries he inflicts – partly because he is provoked by human beings, but particularly because his ferocity is natural: part of the inherent wild energy and aggression that Byron so often notices in animals but accepts uncritically, and even relishes as an intrinsic part of the essential truth and truthfulness of their nature. Following Rousseau, Byron was an admirer of 'animals in their natural state and exhibiting their natural qualities'. Human beings, on the other hand, possess reason, and therefore have the capacity for deluding and lying to themselves about their savagery.

One of the main themes of *Childe Harold* I is the self-delusion practised by all sides in the Peninsular War. Byron sees human beings, especially war-leaders, as cloaking, disguising or throwing a veil of sentiment and fine language over their brutality. Burke had written of how

All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. ... On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly.¹⁵

In the bullfight stanzas of *Childe Harold* Canto I, Byron subjects both Burke's invocation of chivalry, with its repeated images of clothing, draping and covering up, and Burke's references to women and to animals, to what Swift called 'saeva indignatio' – a savage and satirical indignation.

13: CHP I ll.792-5.

14: CHP I ll.796-800.

15: Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. A.J.Greive (London, Everyman Dent, 1967), p.74.