

Ovid's Hero and Medea as Reflected in Byron's Life and Works

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This paper aims to discuss the presence of Ovid's Medea and Hero in Byron's works and life, revealing at the same time the connection between these two characters and Georgian culture.

Sophisticated, ironical and self-pitying, Ovid was highly influential during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. But we also find him to be a powerful source of inspiration with romantic poets and especially with Lord Byron.

"Perhaps," writes Andrew Nicholson, "there is no Latin author with whom Byron could have been more appropriately identified after 1816 than Ovid. I am not thinking so much of the Ovid of the *Amores*, *Heroides*, *Ars Amatoria*, *Remedia Amoris*, *Metamorphoses* or *Fasti* – though all these have a significant bearing on Byron's poetry. Rather, the Ovid of the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*."¹ The last two books were written in exile after the Latin poet had been sent from Rome to Tomi, on the Black Sea, in 8 AD at the age of 51, and where ten years later he died.

When dealing with allusions, we should emphasise that with Byron they appear to be quite unique. The poet not only alludes to mythological, biblical, literary or historical characters, but is mystically guided by them in real life, encountering them, and competing with them, reincarnating their lives and images. Therefore, stylistic allusions are actually transformed into the poet's style of life: the most outstanding example of this phenomenon is Prometheus.

In the sixteenth stanza of the *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, which expresses the strictest condemnation of his beloved hero, Byron addresses Napoleon, alluding to Prometheus:

Or, like the thief of fire from heaven,
Wilt thou withstand the shock?
And share with him, the unforgiven,
His vulture and his rock!
Foredoom'd by God – by man accurst,
And that last act, though not thy worst,
The very Fiend's arch mock;
He in his fall preserved his pride,
And, if a mortal, had as proudly died!²

It took Byron exactly ten years after composing the Ode in April of 1814, to die as he had wished Napoleon to die. Death was missing in the legend of Napoleon. Byron filled the gap in his contemporary legend to approach and reincarnate the myth of Prometheus. For Byron, myth and reality were the same.

When Byron approached the Bosphorus from the Black Sea, he dared to climb the Cyanean Symplegades, which were believed to be the fabled rocks the Argonauts passed on their way to seek the Golden Fleece. The following lines from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could revisit the poet's mind:

1: *Byron and Ovid*, BJ 1999, p.76.

2: CPW III 264-5.

And now the Argonauts were ploughing through the sea in their ship. At last, after enduring many trials, under their famous leader, Jason, they reached the turbulent river-waters of the muddy Phasis, in the land of Colchis. Medea, the daughter of the king, conceived an overwhelming passion for Jason.³

By “muddy Phasis” Ovid means one of the naval ports in Western Georgia, the present Poti, and Medea’s homeland Colchis, is, of course, Georgia.

The myth of Medea, as reflected both by Ovid and by Euripides, was constantly on Byron’s mind. It was the nurse’s dole in Euripides’ *Medea* that actually encouraged him to climb the Cyanean Symplegades. He wrote about it in a letter to Henry Drury, saying: “Had not this sublime passage been in my head, I should never have dreamed of ascending the rocks”.⁴ When standing on the very summit of those blue rocks he composed a rollicking six-line parody of the nurse’s dole:

O, how I wish that an embargo
Had kept in port the good ship Argo!
Who, still unlaunch’d from Grecian docks,
Had never pass’d the Azure rocks;
But now I fear her trip will be a
Damn’d business for my Miss Medea.⁵

Byron’s early book *Hours of Idleness* includes a translation of the nurse’s dole from Euripides’ *Medea*, of which this is half a stanza:

Fair Venus! on thy myrtle shrine
May I with some fair lover sigh,
Whose heart may mingle pure with mine,
With me to live, with me to die.⁶

Comparison with the original Greek shows that a considerable liberty has been taken with the original. The words “Whose heart may mingle pure with mine / With me to live, with me to die”, are Byron’s, though this scenario is alien to Euripides. Neither do Ovid’s lines show similarity with Byron’s translation. In *Metamorphoses* (Book VII) we read:

Whether he lives or dies, is in the hands of the gods. Let him live! If he could set another woman above me,
let him die, the ungrateful man!

Apparently Byron invented a Medea of his own. Byron is haunted by this image in most of his female characters starting from early pieces including his final unaccomplished masterpiece *Don Juan*. But at the same time Byron is aspiring to find a Colchian Medea and is in search of her. He fell in love with a simple but ferocious Venetian woman, Margarita Cogni whom he brought to the Palazzo Mocenigo to live with him. She reminded him of Medea. The following letter to Moore dated 19 September 1818 is one of several describing her:

I am sure if I put a poniard into the hand of this one, she would plunge it where I told her, – and into me, if I offended her. I like this kind of animal, and am sure that I should have preferred Medea to any woman that

3: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 7, 1-73, Medea agonises over her love for Jason. Web site: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Metamorph7.htm>.

4: BLJ I 246.

5: Ibid.

6: CPW I 90.

ever breathed. You may, perhaps, wonder that I don't in that case take to my wife. But she is a poor mawkish, moral Clytemnestra (and no Medea) who likes to be vindictive according to law ...⁷

And a letter to his publisher ends with,

I forgot to mention that she was very devout – and would cross herself if she heard the prayer=time strike – sometimes – when that ceremony did not appear to be much in unison with what she was then about. – She was quick in reply – as for instance – one day when she had made me very angry with beating somebody or other – I called her a Cow (Cow in Italian is a sad affront and tantamount to the feminine of dog in English) I called her “Vacca” she turned round – curtsied – and answered “Vacca tua 'Celenza” (i.e. Eccellenza) your Cow – please your Excellency. – In short – she was – as I said before – a very fine Animal – of considerable beauty and energy – with many good & several amusing qualities – but wild as a witch – and fierce as a demon. – She used to boast publicly of her ascendancy over me – contrasting it with that of other women – and assigning for it sundry reasons physical and moral which did more credit to her person than her modesty. – True it was that they all tried to get her away – and no one succeeded – till her own absurdity helped them. – Whenever there was a competition, and sometimes – one would be shut in one room and one in another – to prevent battle – she had generally the preference. – – –⁸

In comparing his women to Medea Byron is clearly joking – the Medeas of both Euripides and Ovid are much more complex and frightening than either Margarita Cogni or Annabella Milbanke. But in another letter he speaks of Lady Byron as of “mathematical Medea”.⁹ If Colchian Medea was a sorceress, Annabella Milbanke attracted him not only because of her talent for poetry, but also because of her deep knowledge of mathematics. Though Byron never deserted her like Jason, they separated, and she became his most dangerous and revengeful enemy, involving him in slander and scandal. But, it is worth saying, that before the separation she locked herself in her room rolling across the floor in agony from the pain as if having in mind the Byronic words on Medea: “With you to live, with you to die”. Separation was not less painful for Byron himself. His poem *Fare Thee Well* confirms this:

Every feeling hath been shaken;
Pride, which not a world could bow,
Bows to thee – by thee forsaken,
Even my soul forsakes me now ...¹⁰

Fiery love and demonic revenge distinguished his beloved ladies including Lady Caroline Lamb. “Your heart – my poor Caro... what a little volcano! That pours lava through your veins”,¹¹ he wrote indulgently in 1812. This volcanic lady from a highly aristocratic family proved to be as vindictive and revengeful as Lady Byron or Jason's Colchian spouse, far more dangerous than the baker's wife, Margarita Cogni, though finally he had enough of her tantrums.

The first passage of *Metamorphoses* Book VII vividly describes how the Argonauts stood before King Aetes, Medea's father, requesting the return of the Golden Fleece, taken from the divine ram, thus referring to the famous myth, when the ram with the Golden Fleece vaulted into the air with a boy and a girl on its back. The girl, named Helle, fell into the sea which after her was named Hellespont. The ram with the Golden Fleece continued his course and brought the boy and the fleece to the kingdom of Colchis, Medea's homeland.

The mythological Hellespont, the present Dardanelles, is especially famous for its myth of the brave Leander crossing the strait for his beloved Hero.

7: BLJ VI 69.

8: BLJ VI 198.

9: BLJ XI 197.

10: CPW III 382.

11: BLJ II 170.

Leander was a youth of Abydos, a town on the Asian side of the strait which separates Asia and Europe. On the opposite shore in the town of Sestos lived the maiden Hero, a priestess of Venus. Leander used to swim the strait nightly to enjoy the company of his mistress. But one night a tempest arose and he was drowned. Hero became aware of his death, and in her despair cast herself down from the tower into the sea and perished.

When approaching the mouth of the Dardanelles in 1810, young Byron became eager to try his swimming skills in imitation of Leander, though the feat was considered impossible, especially due to the icy currents.

On May 3, 1810 Byron tried and succeeded. Hobhouse, his friend and companion, wrote excitedly in his diary: "Byron ... now swimming across the Hellespont – Ovid's Hero and Leander open before me".¹²

Byron alludes to this story in *The Bride of Abydos*:

His ear but rang with Hero's song,
"Ye waves, divide not lovers long!" –
That tale is old, but love anew
May nerve young hearts to prove as true.¹³

... and in the poem *Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos*, the second stanza of which contains the following:

If, when the wintry tempest roared,
He sped to Hero, nothing loth,
And thus of old thy current poured,
Fair Venus! how I pity both!¹⁴

When crossing the Hellespont in emulation of Leander, Byron could have dreamt of the loving and devoted Hero, the character who never was vindictive, revengeful or demonic like Medea. Did Byron meet a Hero in real life? Did he depict Hero in any other poetic lines?

In 1999 the *Byron Journal* printed *Byron and Ovid* (to which I have already referred), where Andrew Nicholson presented many interesting similarities. One of them is the passage from *Heroides* where Hero presents love as the only occupation for women:

You men, now in the chase, and now husbanding the genial acres of the country, consume long hours in the varied tasks that keep you. Either the market-place holds you, or the sports of the supple wrestling-ground; now you take the bird with the snare, now the fish with the hook; and the later hours you while away with wine before you. For me who am denied these things, there is nothing left to do but love. What there is left, I do; and you, O sole delight of mine, I love with even greater love than could be returned to me!¹⁵

Nicholson writes that the tone, the pathos, the agonising dilemma with which Hero is faced, the hopeless state in which she finds herself trapped, and the self-dramatisation of the whole, are surely matched to perfection in Julia's letter from *Don Juan*, Canto I stanza 194:

'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence; man may range
The court, camp, church, the vessel, and the mart;
Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange
Pride, fame, ambition, to fill his heart,
And few there are whom these cannot estrange;

12: Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron, A Portrait*, Pimlico Edition, 1993, p.82.

13: CPW III 123.

14: CPW I 281.

15: Andrew Nicholson, *Byron and Ovid*, *Byron Journal*, London, 1999, p.79.

Men have all these resources, we but one,
To love again, and be again undone.¹⁶

Nicholson notes that another recognized source for Donna Julia is Madame de Staël: but adduces the *Heroides* passage as a more likely one. Madame de Staël's occupation alongside with love was politics and literature.

But where is the Hero in Byron's life?

According to many biographical notes there is no doubt that some three weeks before Byron crossed the Hellespont, he visited the ruins of Alexandria Troas.

A description of Byron's adventurous stay in Alexandria of Troa is offered by the anonymous three-volume work *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron*, published by Mathew Iley in London in 1825, which poses as a recollection of the poet's destroyed manuscripts. The third volume includes twelve pages¹⁷ on Lord Byron's imagined encounter with a Georgian girl whom he met at a slave-market in Alexandria of Troa and who attracted his attention not only because of her beauty but also because of her weeping bitterly in agony of her forlorn situation.

According to the story, Byron, in his Quixotic manner, bought the girl with the intention of restoring her to her parents in Tiflis, the capital of Georgia. Byron made every inquiry for some person to whom he could safely confide her. The girl was sent to Georgia with an Irish man on his way to this country. Unfortunately Byron never heard either from the girl or the traveller. He was then convinced that some treachery had been experienced.

Fourteen months later, claims the book, Byron managed to find the girl with the help of the Pacha of the coast of Asia Minor, when the Irish traveller attempted to leave for Italy together with the Georgian girl. His Lordship was at Marmorica, on the eastern side of the Black Sea, when he received the notice from the Pacha. Lord Byron crossed over to Constantinople, and after a journey of five weeks, arrived at Latichea to see the girl. The description of their meeting and the whole story show that the girl loved Byron tenderly. Byron again promised the girl to bring her to her family and therefore temporarily left her in trustworthy hands. But soon, when Byron was again on his travels, the girl got seriously ill and several months later she died in Candia, the present Iraklion, on the Island of Crete. The unhappy news reached Lord Byron, apparently in England.

In the case of Lord Byron most of the poetic pieces refer to real episodes of his life. If true, this tragic story would certainly give rise to poetic lines.

In the nineteenth century the editor E. H. Coleridge noted that, if true, this story could be connected with Byron's lyric *Lines Written beneath a Picture*:

Dear object of defeated care!
Though now of love and thee bereft,
To reconcile me with despair,
Thine image and my tears are left.

'Tis said with Sorrow Time can cope,
But this I feel can never be true,
For by the death-blow of my Hope
My memory immortal grew.¹⁸

16: CPW V 71.

17: *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron*, in three volumes, volume 3, Mathew Iley, London, 1825, p. 121-33.

18: CPW I 287-8.

Coleridge writes,

In a curious work of doubtful authority, entitled, *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. G.G. Lord Byron*, London, 1825 (iii 123-32), there is a long and circumstantial narrative of a “defeated” attempt of Byron’s to rescue a Georgian girl, whom he had bought in the slave-market for 800 piastres, from a life of shame and degradation. It is improbable that these verses suggested the story; and, on the other hand, the story, if true, does afford some clue to the verses.¹⁹

According to the Iley book, the news of the girl’s death could have reached Byron not earlier than in autumn 1811. Byron’s two letters to his friend R. C. Dallas, one, composed on 11th and the other on 31st October 1811, informed him of “a *death*”:

I have been again shocked with a *death*, and have lost one very dear to me in happier times; but “I have almost forgot the taste of grief,” and “supped full of horrors” till I have become callous, nor have I a tear left for an event which five years ago would have bowed down my head to the earth. It seems as though I were to experience in my youth the greatest misery of age. My friends fall around me, and I shall be left a lonely tree before I am withered.²⁰

On 11th October, on the very day of writing this letter to Dallas, Byron composed his famous poem *To Thyrza* followed later by a number of poems also devoted to the same character.

On 14th October, 1811, Byron sent off to Dallas a stanza to be added to “Childe Harold”: “There! Thou! – what love and life together fled...” (Canto II st.9).

Here is what Byron wrote to Dallas concerning these lines in the same letter: “I think it proper to state to you, that this stanza alludes to an event which has taken place since my arrival here, and not the death of any male friends”²¹, to which Dallas replied: “I thank you for your confidential communication. How truly do I wish that being had lived, and lived yours: What your obligation to her would have been in that case is inconceivable”.²²

In our opinion, Byron wrote to Dallas to assure him that the lines really belonged to a lady and that they were caused by the death of a female creature “and not the death of any male friends”. Most probably he needed it, due to the fact that the new loss was preceded by a number of losses of his male friends and he would never want to be misinterpreted.

For almost two centuries Lord Byron’s mysterious Thyrza has caused much controversy. Leslie Marchand argues that Thyrza is the Trinity College choirboy John Edlestone.²³ We appreciate the contribution of such Byron biographers. Nevertheless we don’t share the opinion of those who make assumptions against the writings of the poet himself.

There can be no doubt that Lord Byron referred to Thyrza in conversation with Lady Byron, as a young girl, who had existed, and the date of whose death almost coincided with Lord Byron’s landing in England in 1811.

The author of the Iley book never connected Thyrza with the story of the Georgian girl, but when discussing Thyrza on other pages of the book, assumes that Thyrza in an oriental character like Zuleika, Leila or Haidee.²⁴

19: See: Ernest Hartley Coleridge’s note on the poem *Lines Written Beneath A Picture* in: *The Works of Lord Byron, A New, Revised and Enlarged Edition with illustrations, Poetry*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 7 volumes, London, 1898-1904, III 19.

20: BLJ II 110.

21: BLJ II 116.

22: *The Complete Works of Lord Byron*, Paris, Galignani, 1837, p. 175.

23: *Byron A Portrait* (John Murray 1971), p.107.

24: *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron*, volume 3, p.355.

It was E. H. Coleridge who in the nineteenth century established the opinion that Thyrza as the character was English and not oriental. According to him the following lines from the poem *To Thyrza* suggest that Byron met Thyrza in Newstead Abbey²⁵:

Affection's heart-drops, gushing o'er,
Had flow'd as fast as now they flow.
.....
Shall they not flow, when many a day
In these, to me, deserted towers,
Ere call'd but for a time away,
Affection's mingling tears were ours?

We argue that Coleridge's opinion arose due to the misinterpretation of the above cited lines. When we read the poem carefully we may assume that Byron meant the opposite. The lines make it clear that Byron and Thyrza had met each other not in the towers but during the poet's stay in the East, before he was called back but he deplors her death in the towers that were deserted during his absence.

Concerning Coleridge's note about the "doubtful authority" of the three volumes, entitled, *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. G. G. Lord Byron*, we can say that in literary sources these three volumes were not considered truly authentic, especially when compared to the unrivalled power and impression, created by Thomas Moore's version of Lord Byron's biography "Letters and Journals"²⁶, first published by John Murray in the years 1830-31.

The publication of "Letters and Journals" by Thomas Moore, with its tremendous success and convincing way of presenting the poet's life through correspondence, actually meant oblivion to other biographies for a long period. In spite of the fact that the latter resonates to this day, we have enough grounds to doubt its superiority. We are aware of the fact that "the originals of the hundred and fifty-eight letters which Byron wrote to Moore himself, and which Moore published in his biography of Lord Byron, have never been found."²⁷

As William St. Clair notes, "He may have deliberately destroyed the original letters to cover his traces and avoid being found out ... Byron's letters to Moore imply that Moore saw him as a rival"²⁸. Thus Byron's letters to Moore shared the same fate of being destroyed as were the Memoirs presented and entrusted to him. The absence of the latter deepens not only interest but also the importance of its copious recollections.

The new light shed upon the authenticity of Moore's publications attracts attention to other sources among which we note the above-mentioned volumes published by Matthew Iley. I have been studying the story of the Georgian slave girl and its connection with Lord Byron's life and work for over fifteen years, and have published a book, *Lord Byron's Thyrza*.²⁹

The present article helps us to refer again to Thyrza as a character inspired by the tragic fate of the Georgian slave girl that at the same time fits Ovid's Hero.

"The moon that shone sweetly over Thyrza" in Byron's poem *One struggle more and I am free* is named Cynthia ("And oft I thought at Cynthia's noon, / When sailing o'er the Ægean wave, / 'Now Thyrza gazes on that

25: See: Ernest Hartley Coleridge's note on Thyrza in: *The Works of Lord Byron*, vol. III, p. 30-32.

26: Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of the Lord Byron: With Notices of his Life*, 2 vols. London, John Murray, 1830-31.

27: William St. Clair. *The Temptations of a Biographer: Thomas Moore and Byron*, *Byron Journal*, 1989, London, p.51.

28: *Ibid.*, p.55.

29: See Innes Merabishvili, *Lord Byron's Thyrza*, Tbilisi, 2007.

moon' – / Alas, it gleam'd upon her grave!"), like the moon that shone over Hero in Ovid's *Hero and Leander* ("By as much as all the stars yield to your fires / when you shine out, silver, with clear rays, / so much more beautiful than all the beauties is she: / if you doubt it, Cynthia, your eye is blind"). Besides, when in the same chapter XVIII Leander addresses Hero he speaks of his pledge. In the aforementioned poem as in the poem entitled *To Thyrza* Byron also mentions his pledge. In chapter XIX of *Hero to Leander* Hero complains about the following: "You who so often seek whom you love, as often leave her". In our opinion Thyrza fits this fate and the same fate visited the Georgian slave girl when Byron parted with her on several occasions and never returned to her. She died early as a sacrifice for love, like Thyrza and like Hero. The anonymous author concludes the story of the Georgian girl with the following lines from *Twelfth Night*:

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek.³⁰

Therefore we assume that when reincarnating Leander, Byron had his Hero.

Since Byron's time his feat of crossing the Hellespont has been emulated by many others. It is now an annual event attended by scores of swimmers, and even the Russian tankers are stopped to enable it to take place. Here we should point out that besides the myth of Medea, Georgian folklore comprises a beautiful poem telling the same love story as that of Hero and Leander but of course with different names. I had the good fortune to translate this poetic piece into English and it was published in the *Newstead Abbey Review* with an article on Byron and Georgia by my PhD student.³¹

A Handsome Lad of Paravani

A handsome lad of Paravani³²
In love'th a maid of vil Aspara³³
Was never daunted to cut huge waves
Across the sea to meet his lover.
The maid was used to lit a candle,
The candle lightened as a marvel.
An ugly crone of wicked soul
Intended evil for the couple.
She, when in fury, reached the casement,
Snuffed out the light to harm, to humble,
The wicked crone to her oft murmured:
You ever had the same lover.
By then the lad met billows high,
His breast heaved smoothly, had no troubles,
With one hand carried he a lifebelt³⁴
And wafted air with the other.
A single candle on one seaside

30: Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II iv 109-11. *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron*, volume 3, p.132.

31: Inga Adamia, *A Poem by Byron against the Backdrop of Georgian-Greek Mythology*, *Newstead Byron Society Review* (Nottingham, UK), January, 2009, p.29.

32: A village in Georgia on one of the shores of Lake Paravani.

33: A village on the opposite shore of the lake.

34: Georgian swimmers of that region used to produce a special wooden disk with a hole in the centre to put an arm in it during swimming which served as a lifebelt and was called "dolabi" in Georgian.

Could well throw light far on the other.
But moonless night came over the lake
With total darkness all to cover.
And wave on wave did pound him strongly
To swallow up, devour the lover.
He lost the ford, the storm went higher,
The toil for him became thus harder.
The morning broke so full of beauty
Like eyes of damsel fairs that sparkle.
The lad was drowned, his lifeless body
Over the waters floated upper.
And near the shore of vil Aspara
In breeze his crimson silk shirt fluttered.
His loving heart, his poor body
Were torn up gaily by a vulture.

Encouraged by Ovid, Byron swam across the Hellespont and linked anew Asia with Europe. He did it not only through his poetry, that is so rich with Eastern motifs, but by establishing through his feat a symbolic bridge between the Asian land and the European shore.

Georgia is the country that is on the cross-roads of Europe and Asia. In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, published shortly before his first travels to the East, Byron revealed his plans to explore Georgia, referring to it as “to beauty’s native clime, where Kaff is clad with rocks and crowned with snows sublime”.

Unfortunately Byron never got to this country. Welcome to Medea’s homeland to realize Lord Byron’s dream.