

**PROSPER MERIMÉE, JULES VERNE, ALEXANDRE DUMAS, AND THE
COMMODIFICATION OF THE BYRONIC HERO
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Byron's influence on nineteenth-century European Literature is often a case, not of reading, nor even of misreading, but of rewriting. Poets, novelists and composers would imagine themselves "inspired" by Byron, and reach out for their Galignani editions and / or Pichot translations, only to find on more detailed examination that what they remembered Byron as having created was not in fact what he had created.

This is especially the case with the characters he labelled his "Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates"¹ – all variants of that cryptic creation, The Byronic Hero. His great comic poems (with their UnByronic Heroes, like Beppo, Juan, or George III) were largely ignored – except by men of genius comparable to his own, such as Pushkin, Goethe, or Stendhal: but the protagonists and plots of his Turkish Tales were mined extensively ... and altered.

If a writer's English was indifferent or non-existent, he or she would use the French translations of Amedée Pichot. These convey paraphrasable content well enough, but their huge drawback for purists is that, whether Byron's originals are in octosyllabics, heroic couplets, blank verse, Spenserian stanzas, or ottava rima, Pichot translates them all into an identical prose: they therefore seem, to the innocent eye, to be short stories.²

Much has been written about the origins and genesis of The Byronic Hero (although there's only one book devoted entirely to him – by Peter Thorslev).³ My own theory is that he's derived from three Shakespearean characters – those addressed in the epigraphs to Byron's three ottava rima satires: Jacques (addressed in the epigraph to *Beppo*), Malvolio (addressed in one of the epigraphs to *Don Juan*) and Shylock (addressed in the misquoted epigraph to *The Vision of Judgement*). All three are addressed at the start of these poems with apt irony, for they are all unintentionally funny, and all are the butts of people wittier than they – Rosalind, Sir Toby Belch, and Gratiano. Just as Malvolio, Jacques, and Shylock have to be expelled from the stage before the comedy can be concluded with a song and dance (to be fair, Jacques expels himself), so the Byronic Hero must be expelled from the readers' consciousness before Byron's comic genius can carry all before it. In his satires, he is bidding farewell to his previous work. Juan drives out Harold, and Beppo drives out Conrad, Alp, Selim, Manfred, and the rest. Where Beppo, Juan, and even George III, are relatively normal, The Byronic Hero isn't. He's a human dead end. He fails as a lover, never gets to be a husband or father, fails as a politician (insofar as he aspires to be one), and fails as a warrior. He dislikes music, and if there's a party or feast he's always the Spectre at it (Beppo seems at first to be the Spectre at the Feast, but turns out to be the husband of one of the female participants). Beppo ends up re-married, having borrowed underclothes from his wife's lover. The Byronic Hero has always to end up dead.

Another vital Shakespearean prototype is Coriolanus, whom Byron often quotes in correspondence. Coriolanus attempts to break his ties with humanity ("I'll stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin"), but can't, and ends up dead as a result.

The Byronic Hero denies that he has any ties to humanity. Think how well-qualified Manfred would be as a lecturer in Comparative Religion. But (unlike Nietzsche's Zarathustra, his descendant), the last thing Manfred wants to do is pass on his hard-won learning to the world.

These people are perpetual aliens. In *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* Atara Stein has written of the Byronic Hero that he provides "... a satisfying vicarious experience for his [Byron's] audience because of his invulnerability and his successful defiance of institutional authority. In his self-sufficiency, he creates a law unto himself and refuses to be subject to any external authority or conventional values".⁴ True as this is as far as it goes, it ignores the fact that as well as putting himself beyond external authority, he puts himself beyond the society of the rest of his fellow-humans, in self-defeating isolation (just like Coriolanus). One of the Byronic clones Stein chooses is The

1: B. to Moore, January 10th 1815: Ms. not found; text from Moore's Life I 601; BLJ IV 253.

2: "... surely my habits of thought & writing must cut a queer figure in a prose translation – which is the only medium through which they [*the French*] know them ..." B. to Kinnaird, March 9th 1821.

3: Thorslev, Peter L. *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1962.

4: Atara Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p.35. My thanks to Ines Tiger Adelsberger for drawing my attention to this book.

Terminator: but (in *II*, at least), The Terminator develops a sense of fellowship with people, which causes him in the end to “kill” himself. The original Byronic Hero may be self-destructive, but loyalty to his kind, or to any kind, does not form part of the motive for his death-wish.

The paradox is that, whereas no-one loves Malvolio, Jacques, or Shylock, The Byronic Hero is read (or perceived, or remembered), as sexy (unlike The Terminator). We’re confident that he can be Redeemed by the Love of a Good Woman just as Annabella Milbanke (who thought he was Harold) was confident that Byron himself could be redeemed by her love. But he can’t. The Byronic Hero is immune to the charms of the opposite sex – excepting Harold’s love for his sister and Manfred’s love for his (we think) sister.

We could discuss with whom The Giaour and Conrad are really in love.

However, when the novelists tried to put The Byronic Hero into their works, they too had to try and make him sexy – but found the feat impossible without some major alterations.

The influence of The Byronic Hero is clearly to be seen in three driven protagonists from nineteenth-century French novels: Don José in Mérimée’s *Carmen* (1845), Captain Nemo from *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* (1869), and above all Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1845-6). In each case, a weird Byronic original has been normalised, and a standard Byronic stereotype repackaged, for sale to an even bigger and more popular market.

What would Byron have thought of the following passage from *The Three Musketeers*? It’s 1627. The two-faced, cunning, seductive villainess, Milady, is trying to seduce her innocent young puritanical English jailor, Felton, into helping her escape from prison, and is pretending to be a protestant enthusiast like him:

Milady saw the trouble. She felt by intuition the flame of the opposing passions which burned with the blood in the veins of the young fanatic. As a skillful general, seeing the enemy ready to surrender, marches toward him with a cry of victory, she rose, beautiful as an antique priestess, inspired like a Christian virgin, her arms extended, her throat uncovered, her hair disheveled, holding with one hand her robe modestly drawn over her breast, her look illumined by that fire which had already created such disorder in the veins of the young Puritan, and went toward him, crying out with a vehement air, and in her melodious voice, to which on this occasion she communicated a terrible energy:

“Let this victim to Baal be sent,
To the lions the martyr be thrown!
Thy God shall teach thee to repent!
From th’ abyss he’ll give ear to my moan.”

Felton stood before this strange apparition like one petrified.

“Who art thou? Who art thou?” cried he, clasping his hands. “Art thou a messenger from God; art thou a minister from hell; art thou an angel or a demon; callest thou thyself Eloa or Astarte?” [«Qui êtes-vous, qui êtes-vous? s’écria-t-il en joignant les mains; êtes-vous une envoyée de Dieu, êtes-vous un ministre des enfers, êtes-vous ange ou démon, vous appelez-vous Eloa ou Astarté?]

“Do you not know me, Felton? I am neither an angel nor a demon; I am a daughter of earth, I am a sister of thy faith, that is all.”

“Yes, yes!” said Felton, “I doubted, but now I believe.”

“You believe, and still you are an accomplice of that child of Belial who is called Lord de Winter! You believe, and yet you leave me in the hands of mine enemies, of the enemy of England, of the enemy of God! You believe, and yet you deliver me up to him who fills and defiles the world with his heresies and debaucheries—to that infamous Sardanapalus whom the blind call the Duke of Buckingham, and whom believers name Antichrist!”

“I deliver you up to Buckingham? I? what mean you by that?”

“They have eyes,” cried Milady, “but they see not; ears have they, but they hear not.”

“Yes, yes!” said Felton, passing his hands over his brow, covered with sweat, as if to remove his last doubt. “Yes, I recognize the voice which speaks to me in my dreams; yes, I recognize the features of the angel who appears to me every night, crying to my soul, which cannot sleep: ‘Strike, save England, save thyself—for thou wilt die without having appeased God!’ Speak, speak!” cried Felton, “I can understand you now.”

A flash of terrible joy, but rapid as thought, gleamed from the eyes of Milady.⁵

Whether an English puritan of the 1620s would have heard of Astarte may be doubted (though the name does occur in Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*): what's very clear is that he would have not have known Éloa, for that name is an Alfred de Vigny coinage, in his poem about the angel who feels pity for the fallen Lucifer. Nor would Felton have been able to quote, in his erotic disorientation, Alphonse de Lamartine's "ange ou démon?" question about Byron, two hundred years before it was written.⁶ The young romantic Frenchman, D'Artagnan, has already seen through Milady, and thwarted her career, with the result that she now hates him. The young romantic Englishman Felton lacks D'Artagnan's sophistication, and falls for her. Within a couple of chapters he has aided her escape, assassinated the Duke of Buckingham, and gone to his own death.

Unlike Dantès and Nemo (and perhaps Milady), Don José derives only indirectly from Byron: his immediate ancestor is Aleko in Pushkin's *Gypsies*, which is itself a more straightforward reworking of *The Giaour*. Still, his "Byronic" credentials are established by Prosper Mérimée from early on:

"I can't refuse to do anything for such a charming gentleman, who gives me such excellent cigars," responded Don José gaily, and having made the child give him the mandolin, he sang to his own accompaniment. His voice, though rough, was pleasing, the air he sang was strange and sad. As to the words, I could not understand a single one of them.

"If I am not mistaken," said I, "that's not a Spanish air you have just been singing. It's like the zorricos I've heard in the Provinces, and the words must be in the Basque language."

"Yes," said Don José, with a gloomy look. He laid the mandolin down on the ground, and began staring with a peculiarly sad expression at the dying fire. His face, at once fierce and noble-looking, reminded me, as the firelight fell on it, of Milton's Satan. Like him, perchance, my comrade was musing over the home he had forfeited, the exile he had earned, by some misdeed. I tried to revive the conversation, but so absorbed was he in melancholy thought, that he gave me no answer.⁷

He's forfeited his home, and earned his exile – both important traits of some, though not all, Byronic Heroes. But we can't credit any Byronic Hero with a talent for music; and acts of murder motivated by heterosexual jealousy such as José's murder of Carmen are as much beyond them as skill with the mandolin. *Carmen*, like Pushkin's *Gypsies*, "silently heterosexualises" its protagonist. There is no equivalent in either tale to Hassan, rival to Leila, if my theory is correct, in the *Giaour's* affection.



Jonas Kaufmann and Glenn Ford as Don José (Carmen: Anita Rachvelishvili and Rita Hayworth)

⁵: *The Three Musketeers*, Chap. 55.

⁶: Toi, dont le monde encore ignore le vrai nom, / Esprit mystérieux, mortel, ange ou démon, [CAIN II i 22] / Qui que tu sois, Byron, bon ou fatal génie, / J'aime de tes concerts la sauvage harmonie / Comme j'aime le bruit de la foudre et des vents / Se mêlant dans l'orage à la voix des torrents! (*L'Homme – à Lord Byron*, from *Méditations Poétiques*).

⁷: Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen*, tr. Mary Lloyd, Ch. 1.

Pushkin simplifies Byron's confusing technique by only allowing one narrative perspective on his tale of a Russian exile jealous of a gypsy girl: a dual sexual clash, not, as in Byron, a triple one. Merimée adopts the same narrative method as Pushkin, but the quadruple configuration of his theme – about a *French* classical archaeologist, in *Spain*, telling the story of a *Basque* criminal's jealousy over a *gypsy* girl, actually succeeds in rendering the theme of culture-clash less challenging and more everyday. Ethnicity is complex and fluid the world over.

The most important way Merimée develops his (distant) Byronic model is not in his hero, but in his heroine. Putting Carmen into a short, realistic novel rather than into a poem forces him to write her in more detail than Pushkin gives to his gypsy, Zemfira, and much, much more detail than Byron gives his colourless, wordless and passive Leila. Carmen jumps from Merimée's page in a way that – largely via Bizet and his collaborators – has guaranteed her a following forever. Above all, she finds everything – theft, smuggling, love, sex, death, men – funny: something that can be said about no heroine of Pushkin, even, still less of any heroine of Byron. This despite the presence in Byron's life of Margarita Cogni, a female humorist, a real-life Carmen if ever he knew one – remember her mocking riposte on Byron calling her a cow – “Vacca tua 'Celenza”?⁸

Jules Verne's Captain Nemo presents another instance of a writer re-doing a Byron character with a view to giving him more dimensions, and making him more logical and comprehensible. Based on Conrad from *The Corsair*, he roams the seas in his submarine, with a loyal crew – who, however, speak a private language which has taught them, in preference to their own (shades of Lara and Kaled). But Nemo is given a motive for his piracy (the destruction of his family) which Conrad lacks, and an anti-imperialist ambition (though the imperialist power he hates is kept, by Verne, discreetly anonymous – could it possibly be England? If so, how much more explicitly Byronic).⁹

This, implies Jules Verne, is the way Byron *should* have drawn Conrad – either that, or Verne is drawing not on an actual reading of Byron, but on the standard cliché-reading of Byron, in which his heroes are rationally-motivated, and have political aims of the kind that Byron himself, the Champion of Freedom, was deemed to have had.



James Mason as Captain Nemo

Here is the first description of Nemo:

8: B. to Murray, August 1st 1819: text from B.L.Ashley 4742; BLJ VI 198.

9: In *The Mysterious Island*, *20,000 Leagues's* sequel, Nemo is revealed as an Indian Prince whose family was destroyed in the Mutiny: his foes are indeed the British. The original idea was for him to be a Polish prince fighting against the Russians, but Verne's publisher found that potentially embarrassing. Better to offend the English than the Russians.

A disciple of such character—judging anatomists as Gratiolet or Engel could have read this man’s features like an open book. Without hesitation, I identified his dominant qualities—self-confidence, since his head reared like a nobleman’s above the arc formed by the lines of his shoulders, and his black eyes gazed with icy assurance; calmness, since his skin, pale rather than ruddy, indicated tranquility of blood; energy, shown by the swiftly knitting muscles of his brow; and finally courage, since his deep breathing denoted tremendous reserves of vitality.

I might add that this was a man of great pride, that his calm, firm gaze seemed to reflect thinking on an elevated plane, and that the harmony of his facial expressions and bodily movements resulted in an overall effect of unquestionable candor—according to the findings of physiognomists, those analysts of facial character.

I felt “involuntarily reassured” in his presence, and this boded well for our interview.

Whether this individual was thirty-five or fifty years of age, I could not precisely state. He was tall, his forehead broad, his nose straight, his mouth clearly etched, his teeth magnificent, his hands refined, tapered, and to use a word from palmistry, highly “psychic,” in other words, worthy of serving a lofty and passionate spirit. This man was certainly the most wonderful physical specimen I had ever encountered. One unusual detail: his eyes were spaced a little far from each other and could instantly take in nearly a quarter of the horizon. This ability—as I later verified—was strengthened by a range of vision even greater than Ned Land’s. When this stranger focused his gaze on an object, his eyebrow lines gathered into a frown, his heavy eyelids closed around his pupils to contract his huge field of vision, and he looked! What a look—as if he could magnify objects shrinking into the distance; as if he could probe your very soul; as if he could pierce those sheets of water so opaque to our eyes and scan the deepest seas . . . ! (Chapter 8)¹⁰

Nemo has a Byronic power and mystery about him:

A flash of anger and scorn lit up the stranger’s eyes, and I glimpsed a fearsome past in this man’s life. Not only had he placed himself beyond human laws, he had rendered himself independent, out of all reach, free in the strictest sense of the word! For who would dare chase him to the depths of the sea when he thwarted all attacks on the surface? What ship could withstand a collision with his underwater *Monitor*? What armor plate, no matter how heavy, could bear the thrusts of his spur? No man among men could call him to account for his actions. God, if he believed in Him, his conscience if he had one—these were the only judges to whom he was answerable. (Chapter 10)

His love of his native element is like that of Selim, or indeed of Byron himself:

“You love the sea, Captain.”

“Yes, I love it! The sea is the be all and end all! It covers seven-tenths of the planet earth. Its breath is clean and healthy. It’s an immense wilderness where a man is never lonely, because he feels life astir on every side. The sea is simply the vehicle for a prodigious, unearthly mode of existence; it’s simply movement and love; it’s living infinity, as one of your poets put it. And in essence, professor, nature is here made manifest by all three of her kingdoms, mineral, vegetable, and animal. The last of these is amply represented by the four zoophyte groups, three classes of articulates, five classes of mollusks, and three vertebrate classes: mammals, reptiles, and those countless legions of fish, an infinite order of animals totaling more than 13,000 species, of which only one-tenth belong to fresh water. The sea is a vast pool of nature. Our globe began with the sea, so to speak, and who can say we won’t end with it! Here lies supreme tranquility. The sea doesn’t belong to tyrants. On its surface they can still exercise their iniquitous claims, battle each other, devour each other, haul every earthly horror. But thirty feet below sea level, their dominion ceases, their influence fades, their power vanishes! Ah, sir, live! Live in the heart of the seas! Here alone lies independence! Here I recognize no superiors! Here I’m free!” (Chapter 10)

He echoes Selim in *The Bride of Abydos*:

Ay! let me like the ocean-Patriarch roam,
Or only known on land the Tartar’s home!
My tent on shore, my galley on the sea,
Are more than cities and Serais to me:
Borne by my steed, or wafted by my sail,
Across the desert, or before the gale,
Bound where thou wilt, my barb! or glide, my prow!

But be the star that guides the wanderer – (BoA 870-7)¹¹

Unlike Selim, however, he's a supremely competent mariner. Like Lara, he has a distaste for self-revelation. No-one must know his secrets (which are genuine, where we suspect that Byron hasn't bothered to work out what Lara's are):

Captain Nemo suddenly fell silent in the midst of this enthusiastic outpouring. Had he let himself get carried away, past the bounds of his habitual reserve? Had he said too much? For a few moments he strolled up and down, all aquiver. Then his nerves grew calmer, his facial features recovered their usual icy composure ... (Chapter 10)

Verne has to humanise him in other ways. He's rich beyond the dreams of Croesus (like Edmond Dantès – see below). Like Don José, he doesn't share the Byronic Hero's dislike of music: scores by Weber, Rossini and Mozart lie scattered around his piano-organ (Chapter 11). Perhaps Verne is trying to give him a more Byronic air when he writes that Nemo "only struck the black keys, which gave to his melodies an essentially Scotch character" (Chapter 22).

Nemo's walls are decorated with portraits of heroes, some of whose memories we know Byron revered (though his characters don't):

Just then my eye was caught by some etchings hanging on the wall, which I hadn't noticed during my first visit. They were portraits of great men of history who had spent their lives in perpetual devotion to a great human ideal: Thaddeus Kosciusko, the hero whose dying words had been *Finis Poloniae*; Markos Botzaris, for modern Greece the reincarnation of Sparta's King Leonidas; Daniel O'Connell, Ireland's defender; George Washington, founder of the American Union; Daniele Manin, the Italian patriot; Abraham Lincoln, dead from the bullet of a believer in slavery; and finally, that martyr for the redemption of the black race, John Brown, hanging from his gallows as Victor Hugo's pencil has so terrifyingly depicted (Chapter 32).

At one point in the voyage, Nemo's submarine, the *Nautilus*, comes across a recently-sunken wreck:

We were in the presence of a ship whose severed shrouds still hung from their clasps. Its hull looked in good condition, and it must have gone under only a few hours before. The stumps of three masts, chopped off two feet above the deck, indicated a flooding ship that had been forced to sacrifice its masting. But it had heeled sideways, filling completely, and it was listing to port even yet. A sorry sight, this carcass lost under the waves, but sorer still was the sight on its deck, where, lashed with ropes to prevent their being washed overboard, some human corpses still lay! I counted four of them—four men, one still standing at the helm—then a woman, halfway out of a skylight on the afterdeck, holding a child in her arms. This woman was young. Under the brilliant lighting of the *Nautilus's* rays, I could make out her features, which the water hadn't yet decomposed. With a supreme effort, she had lifted her child above her head, and the poor little creature's arms were still twined around its mother's neck! The postures of the four seamen seemed ghastly to me, twisted from convulsive movements, as if making a last effort to break loose from the ropes that bound them to their ship. And the helmsman, standing alone, calmer, his face smooth and serious, his grizzled hair plastered to his brow, his hands clutching the wheel, seemed even yet to be guiding his wrecked three-master through the ocean depths!

What a scene! We stood dumbstruck, hearts pounding, before this shipwreck caught in the act, as if it had been photographed in its final moments, so to speak! And already I could see enormous sharks moving in, eyes ablaze, drawn by the lure of human flesh!

Meanwhile, turning, the *Nautilus* made a circle around the sinking ship, and for an instant I could read the board on its stern:

The Florida
Sunderland, England (Chapter 18).

The *Florida* was of course the ship in which Byron's body was brought back to England. Nemo is indeed like Byron himself in his compassion for the oppressed:

"Barren!" he exclaimed, with animation. "Do you think then, sir, that these riches are lost because I gather them? Is it for myself alone, according to your idea, that I take the trouble to collect these treasures? Who told you that I did not make a good use of it? Do you think I am

11: See Gabriele Poole, *The Byronic Hero, Theatricality and Leadership* (B.J. Vol.38 No.1, 2010), p.14, for the suspicion that Selim may not in reality be the seafaring adventurer he claims to be. Atara Stein ignores Selim, as she does also The Giaour, Alp and Hugo.

ignorant that there are suffering beings and oppressed races on this earth, miserable creatures to console, victims to avenge? Do you not understand?"

Captain Nemo stopped at these last words, regretting perhaps that he had spoken so much. But I had guessed that, whatever the motive which had forced him to seek independence under the sea, it had left him still a man, that his heart still beat for the sufferings of humanity, and that his immense charity was for oppressed races as well as individuals (Chapetr 32).

... although this is not a feeling any Byronic Hero would articulate. Neither Conrad, the Giaour, Selim, Lara or Alp fight for the "oppressed races" of mankind. It's just that people feel they *should*.

Most striking is Edmond Dantès, The Count of Monte Cristo, who is a hero drawn from several Byronic protagonists, incompatible with one another, and placed in the transforming context of a *quasi*-realistic nineteenth-century novel. The more demanding environment of such a book enables Dumas – nay, makes it necessary for him – to provide his protagonist with social and personal relationships, motives – and financing – which it pleased Byron to omit, and which would be out of place in any "Romantic" poem. Like Don Juan, though with added versatility, Dantès can be any or all things to all men, appearing now as an Italian Abbé, now as a cool English banker from Leghorn. In Paris, he is more French than the French:

"My dear count," cried Morcerf, "you are at fault—you, one of the most formidable logicians I know—and you must see it clearly proved that instead of being an egotist, you are a philanthropist. Ah, you call yourself Oriental, a Levantine, Maltese, Indian, Chinese; your family name is Monte Cristo; Sinbad the Sailor is your baptismal appellation, and yet the first day you set foot in Paris you instinctively display the greatest virtue, or rather the chief defect, of us eccentric Parisians,—that is, you assume the vices you have not, and conceal the virtues you possess." (Chap.41)¹²

He is fluent in all languages, from English to Romaic. He is an excellent leader of his crew, not because, like Conrad the Corsair, "There is a laughing devil in his sneer," but because of his charm and supreme nautical professionalism. The grotto-hideout on his rocky outcrop is like Lambro's house as feasted in by Juan and Haidee, with unConradian luxury and totally unByronic draughts of hashish. Like Byron himself, he has small hands and feet, and a beautiful pallor (though his handshake is icy). His face is like marble, and his heart is like bronze. Unlike the Byronic Hero, he enjoys good relationships with numerous father-figures. Unlike the Byronic Hero, he has a beloved, with whom he longs (as any normal Hero would) to be reunited. And unlike the Byronic Hero, whose grim nature and career must be presented enigmatically and teasingly, his piratical / smuggling / bandit way of life, his need to keep his motives hidden, and his general attitude problem, is more than adequately accounted for by the fourteen years his enemies force him to spend in the Chateau d'If – eight years more than the Prisoner spends in Chillon.



Gérard Depardieu as Edmond Dantès

When a band of sailors relate an imaginary shipwreck (Chap.29), saying how a man can only die once, and how they were beginning near their rescue to think about drawing lots to decide who should

12: Anonymous translation downloaded from Project Gutenberg.

die to be the others' food, we know that either they, or Alexandre Dumas, or both, are close, enthusiastic, and frank, readers of Byron:

"I do not ask you of his origin but what he is."

"Ah, what he is; that is quite another thing. I have seen so many remarkable things in him, that if you would have me really say what I think, I shall reply that I really do look upon him as one of Byron's heroes, whom misery has marked with a fatal brand; some Manfred, some Lara, some Werner, one of those wrecks, as it were, of some ancient family, who, disinherited of their patrimony, have achieved one by the force of their adventurous genius, which has placed them above the laws of society." (Chap.42)

When Byron visited Rome, he witnessed the Colosseum by moonlight, and put it into *Manfred*. He witnessed the execution of three criminals in the Piazza del Popolo, and didn't put it into any of his works (unless you take his letters to be "works"). When Edmond Dantès visits Rome, he plots the rescue of a criminal in the Piazza del Popolo – and plots it in a moon-drenched Colosseum (Chap.35)! If the Byronic Hero really were heroic, this is the kind of thing he *would* do! But there's more. Dantès' admirer Franz discusses vampires – with Teresa Guiccioli – in a box at the opera during a performance of Donizetti's *Parisina*!

Dumas' complete lack of scruple in laying out his Byronic wares is both an expert marketing ploy, and a bold criticism of what he considers the unprofessional obscurities and coynesses of the original English texts he's plundering.

"Talking of countries," replied Franz, "of what country is the count, what is his native tongue, whence does he derive his immense fortune, and what were those events of his early life—a life as marvellous as unknown—that have tintured his succeeding years with so dark and gloomy a misanthropy? Certainly these are questions that, in your place, I should like to have answered." (Chap.39)

Byron would not answer any of these questions: Dumas has already, and so we the readers feel superior:

Franz had by degrees become accustomed to the count's pallor, which had so forcibly struck him at their first meeting. He could not refrain from admiring the severe beauty of his features, the only defect, or rather the principal quality of which was the pallor. Truly, a Byronic hero! Franz could not, we will not say see him, but even think of him without imagining his stern head upon Manfred's shoulders, or beneath Lara's helmet. His forehead was marked with the line that indicates the constant presence of bitter thoughts; he had the fiery eyes that seem to penetrate to the very soul, and the haughty and disdainful upper lip that gives to the words it utters a peculiar character that impresses them on the minds of those to whom they are addressed. The count was no longer young. He was at least forty; and yet it was easy to understand that he was formed to rule the young men with whom he associated at present. And, to complete his resemblance with the fantastic heroes of the English poet, the count seemed to have the power of fascination. Albert was constantly expatiating on their good fortune in meeting such a man. Franz was less enthusiastic; but the count exercised over him also the ascendancy a strong mind always acquires over a mind less domineering. (Chap.37)

Where Dantès parts company with the true Byronic Hero is in his unstoppable power – for the essence of a Byronic Hero is that he must fail. But Dantès has bargained successfully with the Pope for the life of a condemned man, and with the Grand Turk for the life of a slave girl. He displays – what no self-respecting Byronic Hero would ever even harbour – an intimate understanding of stock-market dealings: he does not hesitate to corrupt telegraph engineers, in order to create panic on the Bourse. He is, in short, in one of his many dimensions, thoroughly embourgeoised. Only when it's revealed that he has, in addition to all these accomplishments, an exquisite Greek protégée called Haydee, and that Haydee is the daughter of Ali Pacha, do we begin to grin. Dumas' Ali, so far from being the unspeakable parasite Ali was in reality, was a great man, a fine leader, a loving husband and father, and his betrayal to the Turks (which would, had it really happened, have been an act of considerable philanthropy) must be seen as an act of perfidy comparable to the betrayal by Dantès was himself jailed.

Dantès is the Byronic Hero-plus-Prospero-plus. From his Mediterranean outcrop he could rule Europe, but chooses just to be personal: killing enemies here, driving them insane there, restoring young lovers by miracle elsewhere (on his island, in fact). He is the Exterminating Angel, the Sword of God:

“Examine the past and the present, and endeavor to dive into futurity, and then say whether I am not a divine instrument. The most dreadful misfortunes, the most frightful sufferings, the abandonment of all those who loved me, the persecution of those who did not know me, formed the trials of my youth; when suddenly, from captivity, solitude, misery, I was restored to light and liberty, and became the possessor of a fortune so brilliant, so unbounded, so unheard-of, that I must have been blind not to be conscious that God had endowed me with it to work out his own great designs. From that time I looked upon this fortune as something confided to me for an especial purpose. Not a thought was given to a life which you once, Mercedes, had the power to render blissful; not one hour of peaceful calm was mine; but I felt myself driven on like an exterminating angel. Like adventurous captains about to embark on some enterprise full of danger, I laid in my provisions, I loaded my weapons, I collected every means of attack and defence; I inured my body to the most violent exercises, my soul to the bitterest trials; I taught my arm to slay, my eyes to behold excruciating sufferings, and my mouth to smile at the most horrid spectacles. Good-natured, confiding, and forgiving as I had been, I became revengeful, cunning, and wicked, or rather, immovable as fate. Then I launched out into the path that was opened to me. I overcame every obstacle, and reached the goal; but woe to those who stood in my pathway!” (Chap 113)

Byron would have adored *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

If there is an encoded anti-Byron message in these passages, no-one else has noticed them, perhaps because *20,000 Leagues, Monte Cristo* and *The Musketeers* (not *Carmen*) are thought of as adolescent, or even childhood reading. Byron might have replied that this was all too appropriate, since his “Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates” were aimed at the same sort of market – but didn’t reach such an enormous one.

What does all this need, on the part of later writers, to re-write and flesh-out, tell us about Byron’s original conception when he created his Harrys, Larrys, and so on? No-one ever thought of their poems as short stories – or did they? No-one except crazed historicists thought of them as possessing even Whig subtexts, still less revolutionary ones – or did they? Byron claimed to pride himself on the accuracy of his “costume” – that is to say, his local, oriental details: but he pinches virtually all of them from Samuel Henley’s notes to Beckford’s *Vathek*.¹³ They are there for fanciful decoration, not for realistic consolidation: Byron’s Islam is a “faux-Islam”, and we do not expect Conrad, Selim or Harold to show any expertise in Ottoman stock-market manipulation (supposing there to have been such a thing). Not for nothing did Byron rebuke Hobhouse’s historical pedantry by telling Murray of *Lara* that “the name only is Spanish – the country is not Spain but the Moon”.¹⁴

All the Byronic Heroes except Manfred pre-date Byron’s self-exile in 1816. In historical terms, Verne and Dumas are reading back into his pre-1816 works political aspirations (not achievements!) which belong to his post-1816 life. He may have expressed compassion for the Wretched of Nottinghamshire in his 1812 Frame-Breakers speech; but the last thing he wanted to do was empower them, least of all with a view to overthrowing the tyrannical English government.

Atara Stein sums up this ambivalent, frustrating quality in the original Byronic Hero (and his popular descendants) thus:

If, however, despite his superhuman abilities, he ultimately reaffirms his humanity or (in the case of cyborgs, androids, and the like) becomes increasingly humanlike, he leaves the audience content with their own condition and the ability to identify with the hero. Their own powerlessness and inability successfully to defy oppressive authority are, paradoxically enough, affirmed as desirable states. The readers or viewers cannot be like him, and they are flattered that he wishes to be like them. In other words, while the audience, powerless in the face of institutional authority, cheers the hero’s defiance of this authority and glories in the vicarious experience of this defiance, they are not impelled by the text to go out and defy authority themselves. By rehumanizing the hero and taking away or depreciating his powers, the hero’s creators send a firm message to the audience: Don’t quit your day job. The extent of the audience’s own subversive desire to rebel against social institutions must be contained within the parameters of the text itself finishing the book or leaving the movie theater, they must remain satisfied that authority has been successfully defied by the hero on the one hand, and that there is no need or them to defy authority on the other. The satisfying sense of closure provided by the hero’s

13: See Cochran (ed.), *Byron and Orientalism* (2008), p.65.

14: Byron to Murray, from Hastings, July 24th 1814: text from NLS Ms.43488; BLJ IV 146.

rehumanization (a process that frequently involves the hero's death) leaves his audience ultimately complacent. Instead of being dissatisfied at their own inability to match the hero's feats and questioning the institutions that oppress them, they depart the text satisfied with the status quo and the hero's validation of basic human values. Such texts, in effect, allow the audience the illusion of empowerment and subversion while simultaneously forestalling any real-life enactment of those states. The writers and filmmakers have drawn up an implicit contract with their audience: We will give you a certain type of experience and a certain type of hero; you will be satisfied with that experience and not seek to imitate it.¹⁵

Neither William Wilberforce nor Erin Brockovich are Byronic: they work hard, and get things done – perhaps that's why Byron despised Wilberforce. And as with politics, so with sex. The full-blooded heterosexuality of the Byronic Hero is very doubtful (except in the case of Hugo in *Parisina*). Ghislaine McDayter has argued that the Byronic Heroes (Byron's own, that is), so far from being seductive (as in the cliché as exploited by Merimée and Dumas), operate in reality as patriarchal oppressors and deferrers of all desire, including their own. In *The Corsair*,

Medora ... is the embodiment of sensuality. She resides in a tower protected by the pirates and filled with the spoils of their battles. It is a pleasure palace of wine, lilting song, sherbets, and soft flesh, and it exists for Conrad almost as a constant scourge. He does not surrender to its pleasures, but rather takes pleasure in the repeated denial of his desire. If the Freudian hysteric is a subject who desires endlessly to desire, deferring satisfaction at all costs, then Conrad certainly fits the psychoanalytic bill.¹⁶

Byron's Byronic Heroes are much less radical (and weirder), than the stereotype derived from them by later writers would suggest. Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas, especially, have re-written them with a view to making them acceptably heroic, and even more acceptably marketable.

15: Stein, op. cit., p.3.

16: Ghislaine McDayter, *Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*, (SUNY Press, 2009) pp.93-4.