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## Review of *Byron's Heroines* by Caroline Franklin

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# Book Review of "Byron's Heroines" by Caroline Franklin

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The publication of Caroline Franklin's *Byron's Heroines* signals the coming of age of new historicist approaches to Byron's poetry. This is perhaps the first extended critical work on Byron that does not discuss his biography, his marriage, or his half-sister Augusta. It also studiously refuses to speculate on his sexual history or his psychological motivations. But what's a reader inclined to psychoanalytical explanations to do? This reader, never one to pass up the biographical or psychological, found herself, rather reluctantly, drawn instead into the intellectual, literary, and historical sources of Byron's writing career.

Franklin's book begins with a brief introduction that places her theory of gender definitions as a 'dialectical process' in the context of Enlightenment writers like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke, and Wollstonecraft. Her stated goal is to explore how Byron both endorsed and rebelled against his culture's stereotypical depictions of women as (paradoxically) embodiments of Nature and guardians of culture (5). Those infamous binary dichotomies - nature/culture, emotion/reason, private/public, conservative/liberal, matriarchal/patriarchal — constitute the structure of the gender debate that Byron entered when he took up the pen to delineate his first heroine, the dead Leila in "The Glamour."

For Franklin, Byron was both an 'aristocratic critic of bourgeois ideology' and a Romantic writer who 'projects the feminine as the repressed lost self of an idealized masculinity' (10). Whereas she adequately analyzes the former point, the latter position cries out for a psychological discussion, and this Franklin never provides. Franklin also apparently fails to understand that the last position was itself the dominant bourgeois ideology of the Romantic period. It would be more accurate to claim that Byron was enslaved by the prejudices of his era, which, whether we like it or not, led to his self-contradictory definitions of and gestures toward women, both biographical and imaginary. When she succeeds in getting at the prejudices, as she does at various points throughout the text, Franklin is genuinely helpful. But her avoidance of the biographical and psychological sources for Byron's art, the reason why he was compelled to 'project the feminine' in his poetry, leads in my opinion to the major weakness in this volume.

The next eight chapters move methodically through an examination of the progression of Byronic heroines, from the passive odalisques to the active female characters in the Oriental tales, to the women in *Don Juan*, to largely symbolic heroines in the political and mythological dramas. The virtue of these chapters can be found in the very rich discussions of contemporary literary texts that formed the subtexts for Byron's own work. Thus in the first three chapters that analyze the heroines in Byron's Oriental tales we get a very thorough overview of the 'male-authored Regency verse romances' as written by Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Rogers, Thomas Moore, Thomas Campbell, and Robert Southey. While I found Franklin's discussion of these works interesting, I consistently drew my own very different conclusions about the texts and their influence on Byron. For instance, Franklin sees as the major motif in the source works 'the threat of rape or abduction of the heroine' combined with a sentimental idealization of her father as a vulnerable and venerable patriarch' in the midst of some 'political crisis. For Franklin, the 'sexual myth' that is being evoked here rests on the power of the patriarchal family to stand as a bulwark against national threats to security (27), read British anxiety about a possible French invasion. This reader instead sees a father/daughter/crisis triangle as yet another very slightly veiled oedipal dilemma.

The chapters on the women in *Don Juan* are provocative, particularly the suggestion that we see the poem as an example of 'sexual Jacobinism', a sustained assault on both 'the sentimental hagiography of the family and on marriage as the basic unit of government under monarchy' (101). These chapters offer extensive discussions of two works in Byron's personal library: Joseph Segur's *Women: Their Condition and Influence in Society* (1803) and Christoph Meiners' *History of the Female Sex* (1808), and convincingly show how Byron adapted Segur's and Meiners' visions of women as crucial pawns in the game of political control in society. Franklin also helpfully sets the satire of *Don Juan* in the context of Byron's attacks on the Evangelical movement and female authors like Hannah More, Sarah Trimmer, and Maria Edgeworth.

The chapters on the women in Byron's political and mythological (biblical) dramas similarly explore the dramatic context in which Byron was working. We are fortunate indeed to have a discussion of Byron placed in the context of dramas by Joanna Baillie, Frederick Schiller, Arthur Murphy, and the Rev. H. H. Milman. In his political and mythological works Byron interrogates, according to Franklin, "the dualism of Western consciousness: the perceived opposition between reason and sentiment, and the association of the former with masculinity and the latter with femininity" (221). But with this last topic, the central issue in writing about gender today, we arrive at the ultimate contradiction. Although we, late twentieth-century liberal feminists, may not believe that gender is fixed or essential, the Romantic writers most certainly did. We need to respect their vision and analyze and understand it, without judging them by the supposed superiority of our own contemporary ideology.

For instance, the sexual role-reversal that occurs throughout *Don Juan* becomes an opportunity for Franklin to claim that "feminine" and "masculine" roles are shown not to be predetermined by biological gender, but social constructs, moulding the essential sexual are made throughout Franklin's text, and I am aware that this position is 'the' politically correct one in regard to contemporary discussions of gender. But it seems to me finally that we do the Romantics a disservice to claim that they saw things (or very trying to see things) the same way we do. Rehabilitating Byron as a liberal feminist simply is untrue to the writings (and to the life, dare I say it?). But there is much of value in

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Franklin's book, even if it finally presents a Byron that I do not fully recognize.