

# An allusion to *Don Juan*: reappraising Branwell Brontë's Byronic self-fashioning

Jonathon Shears

To cite this article: Jonathon Shears (2022) An allusion to *Don Juan*: reappraising Branwell Brontë's Byronic self-fashioning, *Brontë Studies*, 47:1, 30-46, DOI: [10.1080/14748932.2021.1991615](https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2021.1991615)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2021.1991615>



© The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 137



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# An allusion to *Don Juan*: reappraising Branwell Brontë's Byronic self-fashioning

JONATHON SHEARS

In January 1847, Branwell Brontë wrote a letter to his friend J. B. Leyland quoting from Lord Byron's satirical epic *Don Juan* (1819–24). This was an unusual choice of allusion given that the topic is Byron's feelings of long-suffering that Branwell usually related to other Byron works such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18) and *Manfred* (1817). This essay explores the reasons why the stanzas to which Branwell refers seemed a more appropriate literary touchstone at a point in his life when he was publicly suffering personal and professional embarrassment as he struggled to come to terms with romantic disappointment and his heavy drinking.

KEYWORDS Branwell Brontë, Lord Byron, Byronic hero, immaturity, ageing

## I

In one of Branwell Brontë's best-known letters, written to his sculptor friend J. B. Leyland on 24 January 1847, he reflected on the major crisis of his adult life — the need to relinquish any 'concealed hopes' about the prospect of a romantic relationship with the recently widowed Mrs Lydia Robinson, the mother of his former pupil who had persuaded him that she was unable to marry due to a clause in her husband's will.<sup>1</sup> The miserable epistle quotes the following lines from Lord Byron's mock-epic masterpiece *Don Juan*:

No more – no more – oh! never more on me  
The freshness of the heart can fall like dew,  
Which out of all the lovely things we see  
Extracts emotions beautiful and new (*DJ*, I, 214)<sup>2</sup>

References to Byron are not scarce in Branwell's prose, verse and correspondence. Indeed, Byron was a frequent allusive touchstone for Branwell and Charlotte from their juvenilia onwards, as has been demonstrated by editors and critics

from Winifred Gérin, Tom Winnifrith and Victor A. Neufeldt to Andrew Elfenbein, Christine Alexander and, more recently, Emma Butcher and Erin Nyborg.<sup>3</sup> It is almost a cliché that Byron also played a significant role in Branwell's boyish self-fashioning. A narrative persists that Branwell's Byronisms were largely ornamental and only demonstrate the differences between the accomplished Romantic forbear and his less accomplished acolyte, but Alexander rightly notes that Branwell brought the two together, not only imitating Byron in his work, but following him in developing a 'fictitious mask' that became a 'vital part of his personality'.<sup>4</sup> In Byron's case this involved the melancholy, misanthropic Childe Harold, a character from whom Byron eventually gave up distinguishing himself; for Branwell it was the various iterations of the Rougue, Elrington, Northangerland, and Alexander Percy personas of the Glass Town stories.

Branwell took Byron seriously. His favourite Byronic topic was the expression of long-suffering resignation, the loss of the hopes and bloom of youth, which are common in Byron's verse from his first published volume, *Hours of Idleness* (1807), through the dramatic performances of the exiled wanderer Childe Harold and the self-tormented Manfred, to the famous valedictory lyrics written to his half-sister Augusta Leigh in 1816, 'Stanzas to Augusta' and 'An Epistle to Augusta'. To the extent that the invocation of *Don Juan*, taken from the series of stanzas 212-220 at the conclusion of Canto I, addresses the narrator's premature feelings of age and weariness in the face of an unforgiving world — particularly criticism from the literary reviews — and abandoned dreams, it is in keeping with the general tenor of Branwell's Byronic borrowings. The letter is focussed on the same theme, as Branwell writes 'I shall never be able to realise the too sanguine hopes of my friends, for at 28 I am a thoroughly old man — mentally and bodily'.

The lines from *Don Juan* were evidently uppermost in Branwell's mind at this period as he had recently appended them to an ink drawing of the Byronic Alexander Percy figure, a 'vigorous ... portrait' of a 'youthful and optimistic' man according to Alexander and Jane Sellars in *The Art of the Brontës* (1995), under which he added 'a rough ink outline of a male corpse in a shroud lying on a bier' (Figure 1), which is reminiscent of Joseph Denis Odevaere's *Lord Byron on his Death-bed* (c.1826) (Figure 2). The sketch is one of a number from 1846 in which Branwell gloomily envisaged his own imminent death. The placement of the quotation between the two figures suggests Branwell uses it as a bridge between life stages or to represent the difference between his 'present and former self'.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, there is also a hint of the rejection of some youthful, immature aspects of his Byronic self-fashioning and perhaps a prescient link is even established between an early death and previous Byronic excesses, taking off the fictitious mask in the process of redrawing it as it were.

Nevertheless, the fact that this is the only known reference Branwell makes to such a significant poem in Byron's oeuvre should give us occasion to pause. After all, Branwell's misery could have found a perfect correlative in any number of

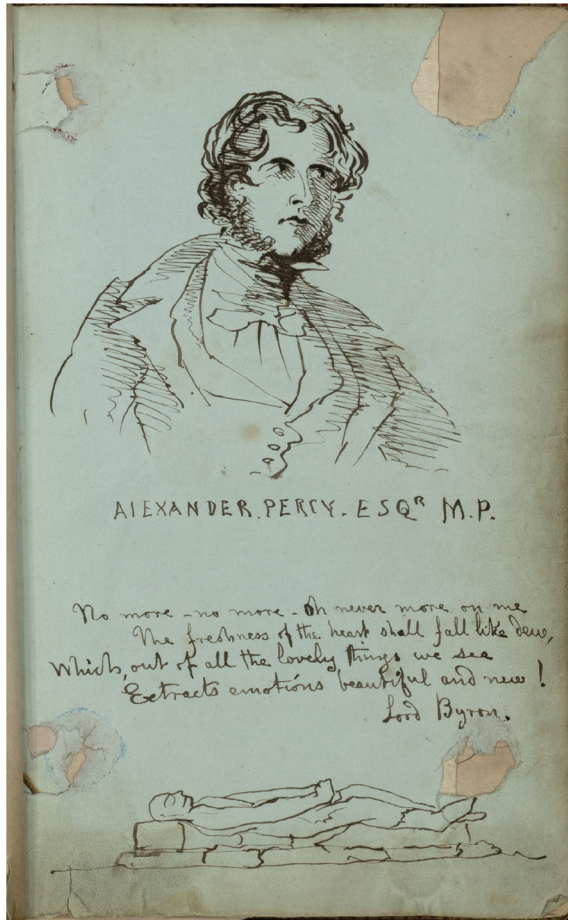


FIGURE 1 Branwell's sketch of Alexander Percy and funeral bier including quotation from Byron's *Don Juan* from the Commonplace Book of Mary Pearson (1846). Image courtesy of Harry Ransom Centre, The University of Texas at Austin.

the aforementioned works to which he had regularly referred during adolescence and early manhood when he first adopted the Childe Harold persona as the basis of Alexander Percy. Why invoke Byron's most notorious comic poem rather than those featuring the jaded Byronic hero that he generally preferred? Equally, why allude to a passage where, despite the ostensible subject matter, Byron is at his feistiest. Addressing the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review* through an invocation to Horace — '*Non ego hoc ferrem calida juventâ/Consule Planco*' (*DJ*, I, 212), which translates as 'I would not have stood for this when I was a hot youth, during the consulship of Plancus' — he proceeds to remark his greying hair and ponders wearing a peruke, signs of his mellowing temper. The Horatian mood continues as he laments his 'days of love are over', 'claret is forbid' and the only remaining 'vice' left to him is 'old-gentlemanly [...]/[...] avarice' (*DJ*, I, 216), affirmed by the further reference to the Roman poet in a footnote two



FIGURE 2 Joseph Denis Odevaere, *Lord Byron on his Death-bed* (c.1826). Image courtesy of Musea Brugge, [www.afrtinflanders.be](http://www.afrtinflanders.be). Photograph Domonique Provost.

stanzas later, which was included in John Murray's lavish seventeen-volume edition of Byron's works (1832–33) owned by Branwell's father, the Revd Patrick Brontë: 'Me nec femina, nec puer/Jam, nec spes animi credula mutui,/Nec certare juvat mero;/Nec vincere novis tempora floribus', which can be given as 'Now neither woman or boy, nor the fond hope of a kindred spirit, nor competitive drinking bouts give me pleasure'. Even so, the thrust of the passage is not of withdrawal from conflict — to 'feel no more the spirit to retort' (*DJ*, I, 213), as he claims — but the realisation of a sharper, more accomplished form of satire as Byron pokes fun at 'prudish readers' (*DJ*, I, 209) and reviewers alike.

At an emotional nadir in his personal life, does Branwell misjudge the mood, misremember the context of the passage from which he quotes or simply ignore that context in the hurry of composition? However disordered his mind was from heavy drinking and self-pity, as Charlotte reported, this seems unlikely for a number of reasons.<sup>6</sup> First, Branwell knew many passages of Byron by heart from his youth; second, the references to renouncing the bottle and premature ageing fit well with Branwell's current concerns as he confesses to Leyland, 'if a dozen glasses or a bottle of wine drives off their cares, such cures only make me outwardly passable in company but never drive off mine'; third, Horace was a poet Branwell associated more than any other with his own precocious literary triumphs and later failures. Patrick Brontë was awarded Richard Bentley's edition of Horace as a prize whilst at Cambridge; at the age of twenty-one, Branwell started translating the Odes. Jim Brown has recently explored the genesis,

accuracy and literary merit of Branwell's translations, finding 'competence in Latin and considerable skill in composing English verse'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite their quality, Branwell's translations were a marker in his own mind of creative failure and exclusion from the traditions of high Romanticism as they failed to elicit a response when he sent them to Thomas De Quincey in 1840 (Branwell was not to know that De Quincey was ill when he received the materials which explains his lack of response).<sup>8</sup> In the letter to Leyland, feelings of personal tragedy are linked to professional and literary disappointment – 'Noble writings, works of art, music or poetry now instead of rousing my imagination, cause a whirlwind of blighting sorrow that sweeps over my mind with unspeakable dreariness' – which amplifies the self-pity that cuts against the tone of Byron's verse. Branwell concludes the letter channelling Byron's *Manfred* with reference to years spent 'in torture and despair when I should every hour pray that I might die'.

The closer we probe the letter to Leyland the more significant oddities related to Branwell's Byronic self-fashioning emerge. This essay will argue that rather than being simply another one of Branwell's Byronic flourishes, interchangeable with similar sentiments, the choice of these lines from *Don Juan* had particular resonance at this point in Branwell's life. I will argue that it not only provides a window into Branwell's emotional breakdown in reaction to the loss of Lydia Robinson, her callous actions and those of her circle, but also signals a crisis in his reappraisal of his youthful literary ambitions and self-identification with Byron and the Byronic hero. The apparent misjudgement of tone discloses what amounts to a rejection of the Byronic posturing and fictitious mask associated with his youth, which chimes with the attachment of the quotation to his sketch of Alexander Percy, but shows Branwell adopting a habit of expression which I would argue is nevertheless as aware of the Byronic as is much of what we find in the various iterations of his anti-hero and alter-ego or the associated lyrical meditations on death.

I propose that this rare allusion to *Don Juan* gives a fresh insight into Branwell's attempts to reconcile his feelings about his 'present and former self' and that the letter enables us to read some of Branwell's earlier Byronic allusions in ways that probe deeper than superficial resemblance. To develop that reading, I need first to widen the scope of reference to establish the earlier patterns of Branwell's Byronic self-fashioning, before reapplying that context to the letter to Leyland that will allow me to unpick the reasons for Branwell's choice of *Don Juan* as a new reference point. In what follows I will therefore describe the kind of Byronisms that I believe Branwell was reflecting back upon as he wrote to Leyland and then, in the third section, explain how they operate in terms of the embarrassed personal and professional state to which Branwell had arrived by the start of 1847.

## II

Elfenbein records the 'adaptability of Byron's appeal' to the Victorians and that Branwell 'would have known several different Byrons, including the witty gossip

of the letters, Thomas Moore's man of mobility, or the self-absorbed complainer that *Fraser's* [magazine] described'.<sup>9</sup> This is certainly true, but in order to understand the background to the reference to *Don Juan*, the list needs reorienting slightly towards four recurring, overlapping themes and groupings of sources. The first of these is Byron's hyper-masculine, hedonistic presence in Victorian periodicals, including *Fraser's Magazine*, but more prominently *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*; the second is the first version of the Byronic hero found in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Turkish tales; the third is the libertarian and defender of political rights of *Childe Harold* and Moore's 1830 biography; the fourth is the embattled contrarian of the years of separation and exile represented in quite different lights by *Blackwood's*, Moore and other early Byron biographers such as Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington. Taken together, they prompted Branwell to develop a series of interrelated Byronic postures that orbit around issues of masculine bonding, the psychology of guilt and the existential angst of the self-tormented outcast, which I will set out here.

As Elfenbein rightly notes, during the composition of his juvenilia Branwell 'isolates what periodical reviews taught him' about Byron. He was deeply influenced by *Blackwood's* — regularly soliciting for work with the magazine — something which can be discerned in his borrowings from John Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a series of colloquies in a tavern setting that ran in *Blackwood's* from 1822 to 1835.<sup>10</sup> The magazine called 'Branwell's Blackwoods' (*BW*, I, pp. 11–31), Branwell's first proper literary endeavour, is dominated by similar discussions of the politics and gossip of Glass Town.<sup>11</sup> Subjects range from liberty to the merits of Ossian and are punctuated by toasts, drinking songs and general expressions of conviviality and male bravura. Wilson made Byron a frequent topic for discussion in *Noctes Ambrosianae* and he is particularly associated with sociability and hard drinking: Christopher North — representing Wilson — claims Moore described Byron 'under the full influence of Bacchus'.<sup>12</sup> *Childe Harold's* decadence also provides a theme. Byron is a world-weary debauchee and in Night 44 (Jan–June 1829), O'Donnell begins one raucous episode announcing 'I may say, as Lord Byron did to Lady Blessington: "The bard in my bosom is dead,/And my heart is as gray as my head"'.<sup>13</sup> The Countess of Blessington's *Conversations with Lord Byron* were not published until 1834 when she fleshed out the running theme of a Byron sated with overindulgence and exhausted beyond his years that we see treated comedically in the passage from the end of Canto I of *Don Juan*. 'To hear Byron talk of himself', she writes, 'one would suppose that instead of thirty-six he was sixty years old: there is no affectation in this, as he says he feels all the languor and exhaustion of age'.<sup>14</sup> She further notes this was partly at odds with his appearance when they spent time together in Genoa in 1823: while he was 'extremely thin', 'peculiarly pale' and his hair 'getting rapidly grey', his 'figure ha[d] an almost boyish air', a feature of Byron's appearance which evokes the juxtaposition of the lines from *Don Juan* and Branwell's drawing of Alexander Percy.<sup>15</sup>

Although Byron drank heavily only during the separation from his wife Annabella Milbanke in late 1815 and during the Venetian carnival season, the

theme of premature experience and its part in cultivating signs of physical deterioration is prominent. John Cam Hobhouse cautioned Byron as early as 1808 about ‘that habit of agitating your mind & body’ through hedonism.<sup>16</sup> The impression that Branwell received of Byron’s heavy drinking evidently influenced the depiction of Rougue who frequently revives his exhausted frame by draining a bottle of brandy. The hard-living, charismatic outcast was, as Neufeldt has recently argued, a figure that Branwell found hard to fully relinquish. He developed Rougue, who first appears in ‘Letters from an Englishman’ (vol. 3, March 1831), into the figure of Viscount Elrington, who in turn becomes the more psychologically rounded or ‘intellectual’ Earl of Northangerland of the ‘The Wool is Rising’ (1834) and then the poetical Alexander Percy in the three-volume ‘Life of Alexander Percy’ (begun in June 1834). In this essay, I alternate between the names given to the character in each text (sometimes using a composite such as Rougue-Elrington when the names shift within a single text).<sup>17</sup> But heavy drinking is a common thread at all stages of the character, as is underlined by the first volume of Percy’s ‘Life’, where, like the Byron of *Noctes Ambrosianae*, he fears being driven to an early death through decadence: ‘I should spend a short life in a whirlwind and die at 20 of pure old age’ (*BW*, II, p. 135).

In 1830, *Blackwood’s* also carried reviews of Moore’s *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron; with notices of his life*, from which Branwell learned about the scandals of Byron’s separation from Annabella, the rumours of secret transgressions and a possible incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. He read details of Byron’s exile from England in 1816, Byron’s brooding and tormented heroes and his beautiful, but morally troubling, heroines. Byron luxuriated in ‘descriptions of gazelle eyes and hyacinthine locks’, according to one reviewer, quite unlike Wordsworth’s more manly depictions of love.<sup>18</sup> Elfenbein argues that during this period Branwell learned that ‘Byron had portrayed himself in his heroes’, leading to his exaggeration of Byronic gender roles ‘to the point where the chief male activity is remembering lost women’.<sup>19</sup> It is no coincidence that much of the first volume of the ‘Life of Alexander Percy’ is concerned with Northangerland’s grief at the death of his wife Augusta.

Other themes of loss and exile of a distinctly Byronic flavour propel Branwell’s even earlier dramatic pieces, ‘Lausanne: A Tragedy’, ‘Caractacus’ and ‘The Revenge’. As he composed these works during 1829 and 1830, Branwell was absorbed in Byron’s dramas, as Christine Alexander has argued, and elements of *The Two Foscari* (1821) are evident in the theme of fraternal rivalry in ‘Revenge’ and of the banishment of Byron’s Cain in the plot of ‘Caractacus’, but *Manfred* (1817) appears to be the predominant reference point.<sup>20</sup> In ‘Lausanne’ the Hermit banished by Count Liliard — reprising the Manfred role — saves his master’s life whilst hunting, which is a deliberate echo of the Chamois Hunter preventing Manfred’s suicide in Byron’s drama, but the imagery of *Manfred* is attached more potently to the isolated figure of the Hermit who is ‘like some old oak which stands alone & Blasted/By stormy winds’, ‘knowing that amongst all mortals/There is No Happiness’ (*BW*, I, p. 81). Famously, Byron’s Manfred



figures himself as ‘A blighted trunk upon a cursed root’ (I, ii, 68) having discovered that ‘Sorrow is knowledge’ (I, i, 10). In ‘An Hours Musing’, a poem of exile, supposedly written at sea, under the guise of Alexander Percy, we find further reference to the ‘shattered oak’ and the ‘scathed trunk’ (*BW*, II, pp. 193-94) of *Manfred*. Through *Manfred*, Byron gives the most eloquent expression of the subjective experience of premature age to which the calendar cannot testify. In response to the Chamois Hunter’s protestation, ‘Why, on thy brow the seal of middle age/Hath scarce been set’ (II, ii, 49-50), *Manfred* replies,

Think’st thou existence doth depend on time?  
It doth; but actions are our epochs: mine  
Have made my days and nights imperishable,  
Endless, and all alike, as sands on the shore (II, ii, 51-54).

Branwell amplifies the Calvinistic undertones of Byron’s *Manfred*, linking them to the features of Childe Harold when he describes the introspective Alexander Percy who wanders ‘through the park of his Fathers Hall miserably sunk in a chaos of his own imaginations’ (*BW*, II, p. 112), mimicking the disenchantment of Harold who departs from the oppressive gloom of ‘his father’s hall’ (I, 55) at the opening of Canto I.<sup>21</sup>

The initial fascination with the villainous side of the Rouge persona in the Glass Town juvenilia suggests Byron became a way for Branwell to explore masculine behaviour and its costs in a number of arenas, private and public, the topic on which he will reflect in the letter to Leyland. If at times Branwell depicts Rouge in clichéd terms — borrowing equally perhaps from the Byronic heroes of Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Lady Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon* (1816) — this is understandable as at that stage the exaggerations are a composite of Branwell’s impressions of, rather than conclusions about, Byron. Rouge appears first as a pirate (Branwell knew Byron’s *The Corsair* (1814)), then as a ruthless and murderous outlaw (you had to have killed a man to join the Elysium society, and in his later poem ‘Misery’, Branwell invokes *The Giaour* (1812), his most extensive allusion to Byron) and a political insurrectionist (Byron was linked to the revolutionary Carbonari society in Ravenna).<sup>22</sup> He is a criminal, but also a casualty of his own ambition and ungovernable passions. Rouge is dogged by rumour and scandal, just as English polite society speculated on the reasons for Byron’s exile to Italy: ‘I have many enemies and it is these who have raised and propagated this infamous slander upon my own character’ (*BW*, I, p. 243), he explains in ‘The Pirate: A Tale’. At one point, Rouge has a fist fight with Zamorna, or the Marquis of Douro: Branwell fashioned a male identity through boxing in an attempt to mimic Byron. Byron took lessons from the celebrated ‘Gentleman’ John Jackson. This is still a feature of the anti-hero in volume I of ‘The Life of Alexander Percy’, where Branwell tells us that Percy’s ‘mornings he generally spent at the professors of boxing and fencing and such athletic exercises in whose rooms he learnt all the art of Defence’ (*BW*, II, p. 125). Moore says much the same of Byron’s habits in the *Life*.<sup>23</sup>

Branwell was also fascinated by Byron's impecuniness, despite his aristocratic status, and made this a new component of Rougue when he gained a title through marriage and became Elrington in 'Real Life in Verdopolis' (1833). Elrington lives beyond his means: 'the style in which he was living far exceeded the bounds [of] even the most ample fortune' (*BW*, I, p. 317). So too Byron, who was heavily in debt, with creditors at his door when he fled London in 1816. Branwell seems to have found something compelling in the protean way his villainous creation Rougue could metamorphose into Viscount Elrington, moving seamlessly between scenes low and high, acts of murder and treachery, hard drinking and gambling, and the lavish apartments and ballrooms of Glass Town's version of Byron's Regency London:

Near the entrance stood to welcome the visitors the statly forms of the Lord and Lady of the mansion. Both of commanding height of Noble figures and Of extreme loftiness of manner well beseemed their splendid Mansion. Lady Zenobia was attired in a robe of velvet her usual physiognomy lighted up with smiles of courteous welcome. As to Lord Elrington those who could have seen him that morning intoxicated harassed swearing and grovelling among the most despicable society [...] would be and were indeed astounded to behold him now, erect and statly free from signs of fight. pale indeed but composed and lofty expression looking around him with such an aristocratic expression as if he would have scorned to mention such society as that in which he was that morning engaged (*BW*, I, p. 309).

There is a catalogue of other elements that could be labelled Byronic in Branwell's characterisation of his hero-villain. For example, Elrington is an atheist (despite *Blackwell's* characterisation, Byron was not) and reads Voltaire and Rousseau (*BW*, I, p. 298), materialist and naturalist writers whom Byron had celebrated in *Childe Harold* Canto III. He also reads Lucian, a Roman Cynic philosopher, who attacked hypocrisy or cant (*BW*, I, p. 270 and p. 298), one of Byron's bugbears. Equally, the actions and debates of Elrington's conspirators, which echo those of Milton's Satan and the fallen angels of *Paradise Lost* (1667), are also manifestly Byronic. In chapter four of 'Real Life in Verdopolis', Elrington and Montemorenci are Satan and Belial as they maliciously lead Castlereagh into unserviceable gambling debts. The coupling of Byron, or at least the Byronic, with Milton's Satan was something Byron invited in allusive terms in his verse, but for *Blackwood's* it became a prominent way to scrutinise assumptions that had been made about Byron's personal life, particularly during the separation crisis. So, in the March 1830 review of Moore's *Life of Byron* (1830), which Branwell certainly read, *Blackwood's* satirised the outrage at Byron's alleged cruelty to his wife: Annabella imagines indescribable 'wickedness' as she looks at Byron's clubbed foot, reminiscent of the cloven hoof of 'the foul Fiend'. Equally pernicious are those moralists who denounced him: 'Here was, indeed, the devil to pay — while holy men, who knew professionally that it was not Satan, hinted from pulpits prophetic fears for the island that had given birth to such a monster'.<sup>24</sup> The Byron that Branwell consumed early was both sinned against and sinning, suffering particularly at the hands of those who took

the side of Annabella in his marital strife. Rougue-Elrington is a protean figure, but so was Byron, ‘both reviled and lionised by English society’, as Victor Neufeldt puts it (*BW*, I, p. 350; n.18).<sup>25</sup>

It is no surprise to discover that Branwell’s depiction of the Byronic Rougue-Elrington takes on a richer subjectivity from 1834 following Patrick Brontë’s acquisition of the sumptuous seventeen-volume edition of the *Works*, which included Moore’s seminal 1830 biography and engravings by the Finden brothers. When Lady Mary Percy, daughter of Elrington, asks the Englishman Sir Robert Weever in ‘The Politics of Verdopolis’ (1834), ‘What does your Nation think of Lord Byron?’, he replies that ‘My Nation Madam are frightened at him they could not understand him he was too much of a — a Glasstowner for our comprehension. for my self I knew him and could appreciate him’ (*BW*, I, p. 350). We can view this as representing Branwell’s own new questions about Byron’s treatment at the hands of his enemies, to which he begins to construct answers by moving from a fascination with the villainous portrait of the Byronic hero to a depiction of the troubled politician and artist Alexander Percy-Northangerland, known more through his thoughts than his actions.

From 1834, outbursts of hatred, anger and revenge — and fits of drunken frenzy (*BW*, I, p. 311) — become more typically mingled with self-scrutiny, self-pity and the famously weary and elegiac quality found in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Manfred*. In the footnotes to his *Works*, Neufeldt shows how Branwell peppers ‘The Life of Alexander Percy’ and the accompanying poems with allusion to *Childe Harold*. Just as Byron elects to ‘urge the gloomy Wanderer o’er the wave’ who ‘from his native land resolved to go’ (I, 6, 51), so Alexander Percy is the wanderer who departs his ‘native shore’ and ‘all the scenes of lifetime past’ (*BW*, II, p. 192). There is also a sharpening of political commitment.<sup>26</sup> In ‘Thermopylae’, Branwell shows he absorbed more than the mood of disenchantment that we find in the likes of ‘An Hours Musing’, composing a poem reflecting on the political situation of Greece, as Byron had earlier done:

Greece! let me drop one tear for thee  
                   Where hath they freedom gone  
 I know thy sons will perish free  
 Yet what avails a glory flown  
 And when they Children all are gone  
                   Where will that light of Freedom be  
 Where! – Thou struck, blasted, lying alone,  
 Must feel this huge hosts tread & wither neath its throne. (*BW*, II, p. 12)

At such moments the poem is a pastiche of *Childe Harold*, but here Branwell specifically responds in lachrymose fashion to Byron’s famous injunction:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,  
 Nor feels as lovers o’er the dust they lov’d;  
 Dull is the eye that will not weep to see

Thy walls defac'd (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, II, 127-30).

Byron's long association of freedom with Greece appears to fuse in Branwell's mind with his appeal in the same Canto to the 'sons of the mountains' in the embedded nationalist song, 'Tambourgi! Tambourgi!'. 'Wither' is another favourite word that Byron placed in conjunction with freedom, featuring eleven times in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, perhaps most prominently as 'the tree/Of freedom's withered trunk' (IV, 114, 1023) of modern Italy.

Elfenbein has described the emphasis on the elegiac as the imitation of 'Byronic clichés' — Percy, for example, bemoans the loss of his wife Mary, exclaiming 'Love survives — but the loved is gone!' in 'An Hours Musing' (*BW*, II, p. 197). As we have seen, the elegiac mood is not confined merely to lost loves, even if there remains an ornamental quality to Branwell's allusions to Byron. But Elfenbein's explanation that this owes much to Branwell attempting to 'combat [...] immaturity' through cultivating a posture of feelings belonging to an older, more experienced man deserves greater attention as it prefigures the issues of the letter to Leyland. If the 'striving for maturity guided' the Brontës 'to elegy as their dominant genre' then this also took Branwell closer to, rather than further from, the kind of contrariety that we find in Byron's life and work.<sup>27</sup>

Away from Glass Town, the theme of premature experience is central to Branwell's poems on the loss of love and his obsession with his own grave, such as 'Lines, We leave our bodies in the Tomb', which directly evoke Byron who in *Hours of Idleness* composes verse such as 'The Adieu. Written under the Impression that the Author would soon die'. When Byron wrote of his greying hair in *Don Juan*, he was thinking back to the period in which the *Edinburgh* savaged this volume of poetry, focussing on his cultivation of a long-suffering persona that was actually a result of immaturity or what they called his 'non-age' (a pun on nonage).<sup>28</sup> Similarly, one of the key explanations that Moore gives for Byron's notoriety was a boyish desire to prove himself worse — and more experienced in the field of manly pursuits such as drinking and sexual conquest — than he actually was. Allegations of the kind of hedonistic excess that later led to the disintegration of the Byrons' marriage, and that feature so heavily in Branwell's early Byronic self-fashioning could, for Moore, be explained as simple exaggeration for the benefit of his childhood friend Elizabeth Pigot. This was also offered as an explanation for the sense of melancholy prematurity and long-suffering style of Byron's verse; as Moore put it, 'the fancy of youth [...] loves to assume a sadness, it has not had time to earn'.<sup>29</sup>

'A sadness it has not had time to earn' is a keynote of the figures of *Childe Harold* and *Manfred* as we have seen, but also of the development of new complexities of characterisation in Alexander Percy-Northangerland, and when Branwell backfills Percy's biography in 'The Life', this is precisely the quality of his temperament on which he focuses. The feelings of melancholy or 'morose silent gloomyness' that suggest premature experience are attributed to its opposite, the 'harsh passionate impetuosity' (*BW*, II, p. 114) of youth. *Childe Harold* has 'His early youth, mispent [*sic*] in maddest whim' (I, 27, 322). The inexplicable

impression of feelings of sadness both earned and undeserved jostle in contrary ways in Byron, but subsequently in Branwell too. The impact of this suffering on Percy's physical appearance is uncertain. In 'The Wool is Rising', he has recognisably Byronic features with curled hair, 'small and aristocratic' hands, 'two calm blue eyes' that gaze 'languidly' and a 'small and well chiselled mouth' that is fixed into a sneer (*BW*, I, p. 25). The description fits Henry Meyer's 1816 stippled engraving of Byron, after George Henry Harlow, which adorned many editions of Byron's works, to a tee (Figure 3). The picture is completed by the presence of Percy's Newfoundland dog, recalling Byron's Boatswain. Yet only a page later, he bemoans 'I — am plunged amid ice and winter and agedness' (*BW*, II, p. 26). Branwell's anti-hero adopts a characteristically Byronic mode which manifests itself in 'a fit of melancholy'. Following reflection on sexual conquests and his manly rivalry with Zamorna, he proceeds in terms that we can identify as particularly Byronic:

Well I too have had my day and I would lengthen that day now till evening but the sun has set beyond all my power to rise. Hah. but though the Earth the Body has lost its beams. Yet do they still glow and brighten in the mind in the sky. If the earth preserve this hard cold crust of clay yet there are men to be found yet who urge that in its centre all is molten heat and raging flame [...] can Ambition exist without youth without the principal of youth. (*BW*, II, pp. 26-27)

When Alexander Percy reflects on his grief at the loss of Augusta he returns to images of youthful resilience, as Branwell would do in his sketch of the character in 1846: 'We see displayed in [the poem 'Augusta though I am far away'] all that enthusiastic spring of mind that ardent ambition which melancholy and greif had not yet withered within him' (*BW*, II, p. 139). The physical impression of vigour and hardiness that Alexander and Sellars commented on is, like Manfred, no certification of optimism.

The selection of texts to which Branwell alludes in fashioning the different guises of his alter-ego, especially at the Alexander Percy-Northangerland stage, seem continually to exemplify Byron's 'self-fashioning' at its most contrary and problematic, alternately yielding and defiant, where experience is falsely attributed to immaturity whilst resilience is a result of age and where the impact on the body and mind is dually a product of moral failure and the cruelty of providence. In the previous description of the body shorn of its beams, Branwell makes another allusion to Milton's Satan — who in Book I of *Paradise Lost* is imaged as a sun 'Shorn of his beams' (I, 596) — but there is evidently also a reference to Byron's lyric 'So We'll Go No More A Roving' (1817, published 1830). This is a poem that Branwell also alludes to — something that Neufeldt misses — in 'Real Life in Verdopolis' when Montmorency warns O'Connor about Rougue-Elrington's hard living: 'Ha that youngster moust slacken it wont do to run on at this pace the sword will wear out its scabbard' (*BW*, I, p. 293). Byron's poem begins as follows:

So, we'll go no more a roving

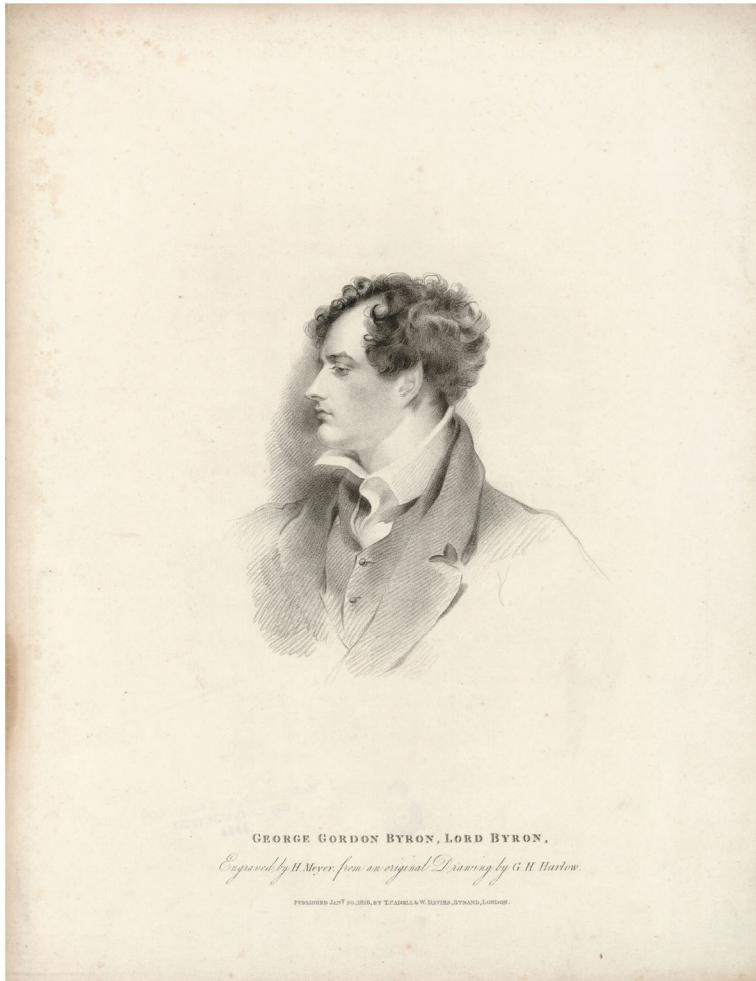


FIGURE 3 Henry Meyer's 1816 stippled engraving of Byron, after George Henry Harlow. Image courtesy of Geoffrey Bond and Christine Kenyon Jones.

So late into the night,  
Though the heart be still as loving,  
And the moon be still as bright.  
For the sword outwears its sheath,  
And the soul wears out the breast,  
And the heart must pause to breathe,  
And Love itself have rest (1-8).

But it is a poem that is hard to take at face value, given that Byron included it in a letter to Moore in which he bragged about his sexual conquests during the Venetian carnival. Although Byron claims that he is a reformed man, having 'just turned the corner of twenty nine', there is some hawing evident.<sup>30</sup> The overt

sentiments are undermined by the contrary desire to prove his masculinity. The poem's real subject is the contradictory directions in which the speaker is pulled by heart and head as he records his premature ageing.

### III

Armed with such impressions of Byronic contrariety, we can return to the letter to J. B. Leyland with which I began and reconsider the allusion to *Don Juan* that also accompanies the drawing of Alexander Percy. It is a highly age-conscious allusion, from a failed poet at the age of twenty-eight to a celebrated poet writing at the age of thirty, imagining what his hair will look like at forty and planning to give up on vice whilst mischievously indicating the opposite. Byron self-consciously reflects on the infelicities of youthful composition and the boyish postures of experience and longsuffering that characterised, in different ways, *Hours of Idleness* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that I have laid out in this essay, projecting the reasons for his premature decline onto cruel mischance whilst, in typically contradictory fashion, retaining the impression of his complicity in his fate. Both are sustained by his claim to have been 'broken/before the Shrines of sorrow, *and* of Pleasure' (*DJ*, I, 217) [emphasis added].

Taken out of context, the stanza from which Branwell quotes is a typical expression of Byronic longsuffering, no different from sentiments found in the juvenile production *Hours of Idleness* or, we might say, Branwell's own juvenilia. Placed back in the context of Byron's poem, however, these lines are a sustained reflection on several elements of the Byronic temperament that so fascinated the young Branwell, in his case leading life tragically to imitate art through the 'fictitious' Byronic mask. These are: the consequences of hedonism; an impression that the time for love and other pleasures has passed; the perception of injustice, of both a personal and professional sort; and anxiety about an immature complicity in one's own downfall. For these reasons, Branwell rejects the image of the hard-drinking Byronic model of masculinity to which he had earlier subscribed, just as Byron himself claims to reject the vices and misdemeanours of his youth that have hastened his own biological clock. Branwell mocks his 'rude rough acquaintances' — drinking companions — that 'ascribe my unhappiness solely to causes produced by my sometimes irregular life' (recalling the moralists who upbraided Byron). His almost boastful claims that his 'lacerated nerves' and 'absence of bodily strength' are self-inflicted wounds give way to greater misery at the thought of that accountability which has made his manhood a period tainted by prolonged adolescence and dependence:

I have been in truth too much petted through life, and in my last situation I was so much master, and gave myself so much up to enjoyment that now when the cloud of ill health and adversity has come upon me it will be a [disheartening] job to work myself up again through a new lifes battle, from the position of five years ago to which I have been compelled to retreat with heavy loss and no gain.

Rhetorically, this is potentially reminiscent of some of Byron's letters, particularly the woeful utterances he made following the death of his mother and two friends in 1811 when he also dwells on his capacity to begin life again: 'At twenty-three I am left alone, and what more can we be at seventy? It is true I am young enough to begin again, but with whom can I retrace the laughing part of life?'<sup>31</sup> Even so, the rather clichéd 'cloud of ill health and adversity' is more self-pitying than the 'laughing part of life'. Despite his unbearable grief, Alexander Percy-Northangerland's poetry demonstrated an 'enthusiastic spring of mind', but in the letter to Leyland Branwell claims to have lost 'physical and mental elasticity' and he bemoans the loss of a 'springy mind'. Branwell uses Byron to channel his interchangeable feelings of insufficiency and recrimination.

In so far as Branwell turns to *Don Juan* rather than *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, he hopes to align himself with the position of the maturer, wiser Byron — to distinguish between a present and former self. This might be enough to answer the questions with which I began. However, in reaching out for a connection with Byron, which actually entails the rejection of a surfeit of Byronic signifiers that disclosed his immaturity, Branwell stumbles upon only further differences. It is one thing to point out that Branwell does not appear wholly committed to that turn away from the morose trappings of his Byronic self-fashioning (hence the general mood of self-pity and outbursts of Manfredesque despair); it is another to note what is hidden in the details of the allusion Branwell makes to *Don Juan*, which becomes clearer on quoting in full stanza 216, which directly follows the earnest laments, 'No more — no more', of stanzas 214 and 215:

My days of love are over; me no more  
 The charms of maid, wife, and still less of widow,  
 Can make the fool of which they made before, —  
 In short, I must not lead the life I did do;  
 The credulous hope of mutual minds is o'er,  
 The copious use of claret is forbid too,  
 So for a good old-gentlemanly vice,  
 I think I must take up with avarice.

Delivering a farewell, however ironically, to love and other pleasures, the asyndetic list of the stanza's second line leads the eye to linger over its final four words: 'me no more/The charms of maid, wife, and *still less of widow*/Can make the fool of which they made before'. The significance for Branwell is hard to miss. As Juliet Barker puts it, in January 1847 he was very publicly in mourning as the widow Mrs Lydia Robinson 'skilfully played on his feelings by appearing distraught'.<sup>32</sup>

It would be counter-intuitive to argue, against other evidence suggesting Branwell was losing his mind at this period, that this allusion actually indicates a rare moment of ironic self-awareness and personal insight rather than self-pity. I do not wish to go quite that far, but there can be little doubt that Byron draws specific attention to his claim that no widow will again make a fool of him in matters of the heart. Could Branwell say likewise? The proximity of the



sentiment contained in stanza 216 to the lines that Branwell quoted to Leyland could be dismissed as coincidence, in which case they are a final, cruel irony of his misjudgement about his own pretensions to literary merit in alluding once more to the great Romantic precursor in such a way that only illustrated their differences. Then again, they may show, even under the stress of enormous mental and emotional strain, just how well Branwell Brontë knew his Byron.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, the text of the letter is cited from Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (St Ives: Little, Brown, 2016), pp. 158–159.
- <sup>2</sup> Lord Byron, *Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–1993), V, p. 77. Hereafter *DJ*. All quotations from Byron's works are taken from this edition. In the case of *Don Juan*, I quote Canto and stanza number as is customary. In the letter to Leyland, Branwell gives Byron's 'can' as 'shall'.
- <sup>3</sup> See: Winifred Gérin, 'Byron's Influence on the Brontës', *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 17 (1966), 1–19; *The Poems of Patrick Branwell Brontë*, ed. by Tom Winnifrid (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); *The Works of Patrick Branwell Brontë*, ed. by Victor A. Neufeldt, 3 vols (New York and London: Garland, 1997–1999); Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Emma Butcher, *The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 74; Erin Nyborg, 'From Angria to Thornfield: Charlotte Brontë's cross-period development of the Byronic hero', in *Charlotte Brontë from the Beginnings: New Essays from the Juvenilia to the Major Works*, ed. by Judith E. Pike and Lucy Morrison (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 141–154.
- <sup>4</sup> Christine Alexander, 'Readers and Writers: "Blackwood's" and the Brontës', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 8 (1994), 54–69, p. 68.
- <sup>5</sup> Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 357.
- <sup>6</sup> See Charlotte Brontë, Letter to Ellen Nussey, 17 June 1846 in Barker, *Letters*, pp. 148–149.
- <sup>7</sup> Jim Brown, 'Branwell Brontë's Latin and his Translation of Horace', *Brontë Studies*, 42.3 (2017), 174–189, p. 178.
- <sup>8</sup> See Alexander Hay Japp, *The De Quincey Memorials*, 2 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1891), II, p. 212. Branwell did receive an encouraging response on his translations from Hartley Coleridge (see *The Poems of Patrick Branwell Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. by Victor A. Neufeldt (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 521–24).
- <sup>9</sup> Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, p. 130.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- <sup>11</sup> Branwell's works are taken from Victor Neufeldt's edition abbreviated in the text as *BW*. I have followed Neufeldt's practice when citing from the *Works* in retaining Branwell's spelling but silently amending some of the more eccentric punctuation for clarity. Likewise, I have not adopted [*sic*] because the occurrences would be too numerous.
- <sup>12</sup> *Noctes Ambrosianae*, LXII, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July–December 1832), XXII, p. 382.
- <sup>13</sup> *Noctes Ambrosianae*, XLIV (January–June 1829), XXV, p. 787.
- <sup>14</sup> Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington, *A Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington* [1834] (London: Richard Bentley and Son, repr. 1893), p. 229.
- <sup>15</sup> Blessington, *Conversations*, p. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Joyce, *My Friend H: John Cam Hobhouse, Baron Broughton of Broughton de Gyfford*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1948), I, p. 11.
- <sup>17</sup> The development of the character in the stories of Glass Town is hard to follow and even implausible on occasion. Neufeldt gives an excellent account of this in two essays for *Brontë Studies* published in 2017. Amongst other things, he argues that there is a discernible progression in the characterization from Rogue to Alexander Percy, as Branwell becomes less concerned with his deviousness and cruelty, and more with his long-suffering side. Percy also acquires musical and poetic talent by the time of 'The Wool is Rising'. See 'Branwell Brontë's Alexander Rogue/Percy Part 1', *Brontë Studies*, 42.3 (2017), 190–210 and 'Branwell Brontë's Alexander Rogue/Percy Part 2', *Brontë Studies*, 42.4 (2017), 321–340.

- <sup>18</sup> John Wilson, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 3 vols (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842), I, p. 313.
- <sup>19</sup> Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, p. 129, 131.
- <sup>20</sup> See Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 21.
- <sup>21</sup> Victor Neufeldt notes the description of Percy's blue eyes probably reference Harold's in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I, 176 (*BW*, II, p. 114).
- <sup>22</sup> A further composite Byronic allusion comes in 'Real Life in Verdopolis' when Rougue looks back at the burning jail in Glasstown. The 'cold sarcastic smile' (*BW*, I, p.276) recalls Lara's 'sidelong smile' (*Lara*, I, 609) that means death to Sir Ezzelin and the backward glance from his steed evokes the same passage from *The Giaour* on which Branwell modelled 'Misery'.
- <sup>23</sup> Thomas Moore, *Life, Letters, and Journals of Lord Byron* [1830] (London: John Murray, repr. 1839), p. 70.
- <sup>24</sup> *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (January–June 1830), XXVII, p. 452.
- <sup>25</sup> There are many more potential allusions to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that it is not possible to mention here, but these are recorded by Neufeldt and readers can refer to *BW*.
- <sup>26</sup> Neufeldt explains that, whether characterized as the villain Rougue or the self-tormenting Percy, Branwell was consistent in associating his anti-hero with republican sentiment ('Branwell Brontë's Alexander Rougue/Percy Part 1').
- <sup>27</sup> Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, p. 130.
- <sup>28</sup> Henry Brougham, *Extract of the Review of Lord Byron's Hours of Idleness, From the Edinburgh Review*, No. XXII (London: Printed for Wilton and Son, 1820), p. 6.
- <sup>29</sup> Moore, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, p. 87.
- <sup>30</sup> Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–1994), V, p. 176.
- <sup>31</sup> Marchand, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, II, p. 80.
- <sup>32</sup> Barker, *Letters*, p. 148.

## Notes on contributor

Jonathon Shears is Senior Lecturer in English at Keele University. He has published books and essays on the poetry of Milton, Bunyan, Wordsworth and Byron. He was Editor of *The Byron Journal* between 2012 and 2019. His most recent book was a literary history of hangovers. He is currently co-editing *The Oxford Handbook of Lord Byron*.

Correspondence to: Jonathon Shears. Email: [j.r.shears@keele.ac.uk](mailto:j.r.shears@keele.ac.uk)