The Byronic Hero: Independence, Comradeship and Community

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Abstract

The Byronic Hero is a Romantic byword for gloomy isolation, alienation, introspection and aloofness and these features have been well documented. However, some of Byron’s tales and drama which include Byronic Heroes – such as *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Marino Faliero* and *The Island* – feature a notable amount of human interaction, which has largely been ignored by critics. This essay looks at the ways in which feelings of independence are often set against and defined by the social ties that bind Byron’s heroes to groups and individuals. Specifically, the essay examines Byron’s fascination with, and critique of, comradeship and the thrill of masculine bonds that are forged in adversity. It argues that focusing on comradeship enables us to see more clearly the part Byron plays in complicating the relationship between independence, dependence and manliness.

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It might seem counterintuitive, perhaps even a little perverse, to embark on an essay that explores Byron’s attitude to community through a study of the Byronic Hero. The Byronic Hero is, after all, a Romantic byword for gloomy isolation, alienation, introspection and aloofness, even as these characteristics are intermingled with others that are often more positively appraised. Walter Scott linked the Byronic Hero’s withdrawal from the world to unspecified guilt.[[1]](#endnote-1)

But Thomas Babington Macauley, writing in the *Edinburgh Review*, diagnosed ‘a man proud, moody, cynical’, yet also ‘capable of deep and strong affection’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Deborah Lutz describes Conrad, the pirate chief of Byron’s *The Corsair*, as ‘defiant, alienated, misanthropic (and misogynist), yet also sensitive, honourable and faithful’.[[3]](#endnote-3) But even if we allow for recognition of the ‘mixed essence’ (I, ii, 41), or the ‘conflict’ of ‘elements’ (I, ii, 42), that Manfred self-diagnoses, it is still common to focus on these qualities as part of the interiority of the Byronic Hero, the incongruous traits of personality that largely remain inscrutable to observers. Macauley’s words direct us rather to the social or interpersonal; ‘affection’, as Thomas Dixon has explained, was an emotion still conceived in the early nineteenth century as the foundation of the associational bonds that kept the more destructive and dangerous passions in check.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This is not to say that the Byronic Hero’s most characteristic, and most remarked, attitudes are not those of proud hauteur, often accompanied by defiance and deep mental reflection. This is one of the keynotes of Conrad, after all: ‘Lone, wild, and strange, he stood alike exempt / From all affection and from all contempt’ (I, 271-72). However, if we accept the principle of the mixed essence of the hero, then it is reasonable to consider that this appraisal does not indicate a final word on character so much as one view of Conrad’s reputation deriving from the experiences of a specific community constituted of renegades, outcasts and rebels over whom he exercises power. Equally, Childe Harold’s most common pose sees him set aside from communal activity, but he is not unconscious of its functions, nor unable to feel appreciation of them: ‘[he] at a little distance stood / And view’d, but not displeas’d, the revelrie, / Nor hated harmless mirth, however rude’ (*CHP*, I, 72). Childe Harold’s relationship with the world is often psychologically complex. As Jane Stabler comments, when Harold stands apart from the crowds at St Peter’s in Rome, his ‘little distance … indicates the gradations of a superior sensibility and class consciousness, but does not cut him off entirely from group festivity’. We could add that, in the same manner that, in exile, ‘spatial awareness acquires critical intensity as the outcast maps the distance between himself and home’, self-consciousness about isolation can lead the Byronic Hero into greater awareness of social networks that are part of the experience of that exile.[[5]](#endnote-5) Then there is the fact that there is quite a divergence between manifestations of the Byronic Hero in terms of how much time they spend alone: if Hassan and Manfred are figures of solitude, it is perhaps surprising to remember how much time, within their respective narratives, the likes of Conrad, Marino Faliero and Fletcher Christian spend in company. If Harold can claim ‘I stood / Among them, but not of them’ (*CHP*, III, 113), this is again only one aspect of the experience of isolation and community for the Byronic Hero.

More often than not, what Byron seems most interested in in iterations of the Hero found in, for example, *The Corsair*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Island*, and Hero-adjacent texts such as *Marino Faliero*, is not the consequences of extreme forms of individuation, which have been well documented, but in testing the strength and weakness of different types of bonds and affiliations. These are bonds that exist mainly between men and men, but also between men and women. The latter are more obvious: Conrad’s tender feelings for Medora, Selim’s for Zuleika, Marino Faliero’s for Angiolina, all conflict with their pride and cynicism. They are often important for weakening masculine self-mastery at critical moments of action, as when Conrad elects to save the women of Seyd’s haram from fire and exposes himself to capture. But while this essay will touch on such examples, particularly as they compromise male bonding, its main focus is the less frequently explored masculine relationships.

It is true that ‘community’ is not a word that features prominently in Byron’s lexicon, but that does not mean he pays no attention to the subject.[[6]](#endnote-6) Some critical work has been done on the idea of collective participation in tales of the Byronic Hero, most recently by Emily Bernhard Jackson who has argued that for the Byronic Hero, ‘isolation is always intimately linked to connection’. But she proposes that the Byronic Hero is ‘defined by present isolation’, that connections are generally part of memory, and that the hero is ‘posed against background societies of which they are adamantly not a part’.[[7]](#endnote-7) I want to go a step further than this and examine connections that do exist within the present moment of the narratives of the Byronic Hero. Of particular interest, in scrutinising male bonding, is, I will argue, the attraction to, but also the limits of, affective ties of camaraderie or comradeship. The *OED* defines a comrade as ‘One who shares the same room, a room chamber-fellow, “chum”; *esp*. among soldiers, a tent-fellow, fellow soldier (also *comrade-in-arms*)’ and, more generally, ‘an associate in friendship, occupation, fortunes, etc., a close companion, mate, fellow’. Byron undoubtedly associates the word with martial contexts and adventurous seafaring, following Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Captain John Smith’s *Sea-man’s Grammar* (1691)and John Dalyell’s *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea* (1812), which is known to have influenced Byron’s composition of the shipwreck stanzas in *Don Juan* Canto II. When Byron gave *The Island*, the poem containing the final iteration of the Byronic Hero, the subtitle *Christian and His Comrades*, he appeared to draw out a deliberate contrast between two types of community – that of the peaceful islanders of Toobonai and that of the martial heroism of the British navy and the mutineer Fletcher Christian. But he was also signalling the culmination of certain ideas about comradeship that had been present in earlier tales and drama featuring the Byronic Hero. This essay aims to trace the tensions within the Byronic Hero’s experience of comradeship, and the relative pull of different types of community, that shows the extent to which he remains enmeshed in social networks despite giving the appearance of relinquishing them.

In the process, the essay will also maintain that the tales of the Byronic Hero move in the direction of a critique of ideas that had long circulated throughout the eighteenth century concerning the vitality of male independence, even as Byron glamourises detachment. As Matthew McCormack has explained, independence in Georgian England primarily meant, for the upper classes at least, ‘not just autonomy, but the condition in which self-mastery, conscience and individual responsibility could be exercised’, which meant being free from political obligations and able to ‘resist the lure of patronage’.[[8]](#endnote-8) In terms which chime more immediately with those of the Byronic Hero, the independent man was also ‘the incorruptible repudiator of all that was felt to be wrong in contemporary social and political life’.[[9]](#endnote-9) This was seen as a key component of manliness, particularly for the aristocracy. By the time of the Romantic period, independence as impartiality had shifted to mean something more like ‘an idealised subject who made his own world’.[[10]](#endnote-10) When Harold adopts a posture of cultural indifference, he takes on an extreme version of such independence: ‘The manly, rational and disinterested (‘independent’) spectating subject is empowered while his spectacle (in this case, corruption) is objectified and belittled’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Even more obviously, Conrad’s detachment and mode of life is defined against, and expressed as a critique of, decadence and political hypocrisy that is linked to a lack of independent principles:

Let him who crawls enamoured of decay,

Cling to his couch, and sicken years away:

…

Ours – the fresh turf; and not the feverish bed.

…

His corse may boast its urn and narrow cave,

And they who loathed his life may gild his grave. (I, 1, 27-34)

The Byronic Hero rebels against the bourgeois norms of a host community – that in this case seem as much Western as Eastern, despite the Turkish setting – just as much as he wrestles with his own inner demons. As Rolf P. Lessenich puts it, ‘Solitary in his aloofness from the decent bourgeois *Spießbürger*, disdaining their drabness of life and mendacious morality, he is like a noble wild horse that leaves the protecting caravan in the desert of life’.[[12]](#endnote-12) This is correct up to a point, but ignores the fact that, from at least *The Corsair* onwards, some Byronic Heroes do not act independently even as they overtly eschew bonds and make misanthropic utterances. They occupy a world in which most significant actions are undertaken in the context of comradeship that has been too often overlooked. The experience of independence, for the Byronic Hero, does not necessarily manifest itself as isolation. What this essay ultimately aims to do is to demonstrate that focusing on communities based on comradeship in the tales of the Byronic Hero enables us to see more clearly the part Byron plays in redefining the links between independence, dependence and manliness.

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Byron’s attitude to social worlds could be contrary: as Fiona MacCarthy remarks of the period when Hobhouse visited Byron at Newstead in 1809, ‘His longing for company alternated with a stronger desperation to be rid of it’.[[13]](#endnote-13) He was comfortable taking on outsider or oppositional roles in his life, such as playing *cavalier servente* to Teresa Guiccioli, or in his associations with the Godwin-Shelley circle. Comradeship usually meant countercultural association for Byron, a sense of being at odds with dominant cultural norms. It is something that Byron experienced at Cambridge with the set that orbited around Charles Skinner Matthews, in early encounters with the radical brothers Leigh and John Hunt, and with the secret society of the Carbonari while he was resident in Ravenna. There was a linguistic aspect to this. He enjoyed the homosexual codes in which he communicated with Matthews and Hobhouse in correspondence in much the same way that he relished the code words and passwords that circulated amongst and facilitated entry into the Carbonari. Both came with a frisson of excitement because of secrecy and illegality. They are aspects of Byron’s life which are of a piece with the sense of romance or thrill of comradeship that is conveyed by the countercultural bonds found firstly in the early Turkish tale, *The Bride of Abydos*,and then explored more extensively in *The Corsair*.

As Wim Tigges notes, the pirate community of *The Corsair* suggests an ‘extraordinary partiality to the tribe’.[[14]](#endnote-14) That theme is given its clearest, if least complex, utterance in *The Bride of Abydos*. Much of the action of *The Bride* is submerged in a series of long expositional speeches delivered by Selim, who seeks revenge for the death of his father at the hands of the despot, Giaffir, and to liberate Zuleika from a forced marriage. He confesses to Zuleika that he is not her brother as she believed but rather the party wronged by her father. Yet, Byron’s imagination catches fire in Canto II when Selim reveals that he leads a pirate band who aim to overthrow Giaffir. The following description of the pirates is something of a manifesto for comradeship in Byron’s early tales:

'Tis true they are a lawless brood,

But rough in form, nor mild in mood;

And every creed, and every race,

With them hath found – may find a place;

But open in speech and ready in hand,

Obedience to their chief’s command;

A soul for every enterprise,

That never sees with terror’s eyes;

Friendship for each, and faith to all,

And vengeance vowed for those who fall. (II, 20, 363-72)

Even as Selim’s vendetta against Giaffir is strictly personal, Byron presents a romanticised study of comradeship. In one sense they are an exclusive band of men with bonds forged in adversity, outcasts living beyond the rule of law, who are few in number, partly driven together by expediency, honest and brave, despite being rough in manners. But Byron also stresses a democratic and inclusive character to the group: ‘every creed, and every race, / With them hath found – may find a place’. It is an idealised form of masculinity that goes beyond ideas of political independence or disinterest and embraces the romance of the incorruptible repudiator. This latter point is made apparent as Selim continues to describe their aims: ‘The last of Lambro’s patriots there / Anticipated freedom share’ (II, 20, 380-81), as they ‘ease their hearts with prate / Of equal rights, which man ne’er knew’ (II, 20, 385-86). They are comrades in the sense of fellow soldiers and tent-fellows, sharing Selim’s ‘tent on shore, [his] galley on the sea’ (II, 20, 390).

The tragic finale of the poem is also more notably a study in the romance of comradeship than it is of the psychological burdens of isolation. Surprised by Giaffir’s men as he comes to free Zuleika, Selim’s last stand is framed by the conflicting pull of associational bonds. In a motif that Byron will develop further in *The Corsair*, Selim’s comrades are presented as arriving to rescue their chief, apparently in the nick of time, but this cannot prevent his death. As he bids farewell to Zuleika, Selim evokes the motif of heroism against the odds, and not his own suffering, which comes of recognising their inferiority in numbers:

One kiss, Zuleika – ’tis my last;

But yet my band not far from shore

May hear this signal, see the flash;

Yet now too few – the attempt were rash. (II, 23, 514-17)

In the final moment, salvation lies at hand in a group of faithful men: ‘His boat appears – not five oars’ length – / His comrades strain with desperate strength – / Oh are they yet in time to save?’ (II, 24, 547-49). The answer to that question is yes; and yet, in an action that is presented as a fatal weakness, Selim pauses to glance backwards to Zuleika and is killed by a gunshot from Giaffir. It seems important that Byron presents this moment as both a virtue of Selim’s devotion to Zuleika, but simultaneously as a sign of masculine weakness, an emotional dependency on a woman that is opposed not to proud isolation, but to a group of manly comrades: ‘wherefore did he turn to look … ?/ … His back was to the dashing spray; / Behind, but close, his comrades lay’ (II, 25, 563-70).

The outcome of *The Bride of Abydos* centres on themes of masculinity as part of a world of comradeship that is about the attractions, risks and limits of different associational bonds. If the aims of Selim and his men appear fairly loose and coincidental, rather than integral, manly independence in self-imposed exile is less a matter of aloofness than a product of partiality to the tribe. If in *The Bride of Abydos*,the relationships between comrades are lightly drawn, and the theme of comradeship introduced suddenly in order to change mood and inject surprise, *The Corsair* explores masculine independence amongst the ties of comradeship more fully. For Conrad’s men, partiality to the tribe is partly a partiality to the charismatic leadership of Conrad, which sets a tone for a study of the nature of masculine bonds of comradeship that feature prominently.

The theme of comradeship occupies the narrator’s attention for most of the opening 130 lines until Conrad is first introduced in person. In an opening ‘song’ about the liberty of pirate life, stress is repeatedly laid on the dynamic of communal purpose, deriving from a shared experience of jeopardy and mutual dependence, established by the accumulated use of possessive determiners and the first-person plural pronoun, ‘ours’, which signal collective identity:

O’er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,

Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free

…

Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey.

Ours the wild life in tumult still to range

…

Ours are the tears, though few, sincerely shed,

When Ocean shrouds and sepulchres our dead. (I, 1, 1-2; 6-7; 35-36)

The poem begins in an island setting, and the declamations of shared experience are revealed to be part of the ‘sounds that thrilled the rocks along’ (I, 2, 45) amongst the ‘scattered groups’ (I, 2, 47) of pirates who ‘game – carouse – converse’ (I, 2, 48) upon the beach. When one of Conrad’s ships, a ‘home returning bark’, is recognised as ‘ours’ (I, 3, 87), the outlaws gather on the shore with ‘welcome shout’ and ‘friendly speech’ (I, 4, 103):

When hand grasps hand uniting on the beach;

The smile, the question, and the quick reply,

And the heart’s promise of festivity! (I, 4, 104-6)

This masculine camaraderie, underlined by the firm physicality of ‘grasps’, is immediately contextualised as deriving from the trust and loyalty felt towards Conrad by the pirates: ‘Who would not brave the battle-fire, the wreck, / To move the monarch of her peopled deck?’ (I, 3, 96). Their fellowship to each other is maintained by their devotion to their chief. Perhaps most significantly of all in contributing to the flavour of comradeship, in a pattern later to be repeated in *The Island*, is the often-overlooked naming of individuals amongst Conrad’s men and the distinct roles they are assigned. Juan is first mentioned as part of Conrad’s privileged inner circle, who carries the messages from the returning crew to their leader, but Pedro (a faithful ally), Anselmo (captain of one of Conrad’s ships) and Gonsalvo (a member of the band particularly cherished by dint of his youth) also stand clear of the more general ranks and, through their naming, acquire the status of comrades-in-arms.

The spirit of comradeship initially sketched is, of course, offset by the famous account of Conrad’s fierce independence of spirit and loathing of mankind: ‘He hated man too much to feel remorse, / And thought the voice of wrath a sacred call, / To pay the injuries of some on all’ (I, 11, 262-64). Nevertheless, despite his self-diagnosis as a ‘villain’ (I, 11, 265), the opposition of ‘*some’* to ‘all’ indicates more than a purely individual cause. It is noticeable that Conrad, far from being entirely isolated in terms of feeling, is described as continually negotiating the performative dimensions of leadership and the self-consciousness of the elements of dependency which intersect with what would otherwise be a straightforward coupling of manliness with independence. Hence, in sentiments that characteristically blend scorn of others with a pride that is tainted by self-loathing, Conrad contemplates the risks of death for himself and others in his plans for the night-raid to torch the boats and stronghold of the Pasha Seyd:

Yet was I brave – mean boast where all are brave!

Ev’n insects sting for aught they seek to save.

This common courage which with brutes we share,

That owes its deadliest efforts to despair,

Shall merit claims – but ’twas my nobler hope

To teach my few with numbers still to cope;

Long have I led them – not to vainly bleed:

No medium now – we perish or succeed;

So let it be – it irks not me to die;

But thus to urge them whence they cannot fly. (I, 13, 325-34)

Conrad’s speech drifts from bleak speculations on the value of his own bravery and aspirations into a somewhat surprising reflection on his feelings towards his comrades. Or rather his thoughts pivot away from despair and fall instead, as had Selim’s, on the issue of the smallness of his crew, ‘my few with numbers’. It is a reminder that camaraderie belongs to ‘some’, a limited collective, and not to the ‘all’ of the wider world he disdains. Where sharing bravery is initially a sign of masculine weakness that reduces Conrad in his own estimation to the level of ‘brutes’, this is countermanded by the fact that he admits to sharing the peril in which he stands with his men, as indicated by the plural first-person: ‘*we* perish or succeed’. More than this, he relegates his own cares below his responsibility to his men and the thought that he may ‘urge them whence they cannot fly’. That commitment to comrades-in-arms may derive in part from pride – not being seen to fail in the eyes of his men – but it does not appear to be unaccompanied by a reciprocal sense of responsibility to others that is a key part of his claims to independence.

In one sense, manly independence drives Conrad away from an island community that is seen in a different, feminised aspect at the start of the story when the narrator remarks the ‘gentler anxious tone’ (I, 5,109) of the women who enquire of the returning ship about ‘Friend’s, husbands’, lovers’ names’ (I, 5, 110). This is further emphasised when we are told of Conrad’s abandonment of his lover, Medora, who appeals to him to ‘learn the joys of peace to share’ (I, 14, 389) and appreciate the value of ‘a home / As bright as this’ (I, 14, 390-91). Yet, turning away from female company, it is not being alone but being amongst men that brings to the fore Conrad’s strongest feelings of independence. He can act most freely in the mode of McCormack’s ‘incorruptible repudiator’ when he has men to command. As he reassures Medora that he will return safely and that the alternative domestic community of her ‘matrons’ and ‘handmaids’ (I, 14, 461) shall ‘make repose more sweet’ (I, 14, 463), their communion is interrupted by the call to arms: ‘List! – ’tis the bugle! – Juan shrilly blew’ (I, 14, 464). The renaming of Juan solidifies the determination of actions shared between men and not men and women, further stressed by the emphasis placed on masculine activity that contrasts the matrons and handmaids – ‘The clang of tumult … The shout, the signal … As marks his eye the seaboy on the mast’ (I, 16, 522-25) – as Conrad greets his crew and ‘feels of all his former self possest’ (I,16, 532).

Independence can only be truly experienced for Conrad amongst, as opposed to being apart from, a group of comrades. Even as the narrator tells us the ‘evil passions of his youth had made / Him value less who loved – than what obey’d’ (I, 16, 553-54), hands are once again joined in union and plans shared as much as orders given:

‘Call Pedro here!’ He comes – and Conrad bends,

With courtesy he deign’d his friends;

‘Receive these tablets, and peruse with care,

Words of high trust and truth are graven there;

Double the guard, and when Anselmo’s bark

Arrives, let him alike these orders mark:

In three days (serve the breeze) the sun shall shine

On our return – till then all peace be thine!’

This said, his brother Pirate’s hand he wrung,

Then to his boat with haughty gesture sprung. (I, 17, 561-70)

Earlier, Juan bends to Conrad when delivering his message. Here it is Conrad who ‘bends’ to Pedro, with courtesy. Despite the haughtiness of his actions, Conrad’s appreciation of the ‘busy hands’ leads him into rising feelings of affection: ‘He marks how well the ship her helm obeys, / How gallant all her crew, and deigns to praise. / His eyes of pride to young Gonsalvo turn’ (I, 17, 575-77). Noticeably, Conrad’s self-division at the moment of sailing is described in terms of manliness that suggests a refusal to submit emotionally to the watching Medora, and the temptation to remain at home, and yet his independence is secured through reassertion of the bond indicated by his pride in Gonsalvo:

She – his Medora – did she mark the prow?

Ah! never loved he half so much as now!

But much must yet be done ere dawn of day –

Again he mans himself and turns away;

Down to the cabin with Gonsalvo bends,

And there unfolds his plan, his means, and ends. (I, 17, 581-86)

In less tragic circumstances, the backwards glance repeats the fatal delay of Selim on the beach at the climax of *The Bride of Abydos*. This time, that momentary weakening is a transition back to camaraderie. The word ‘bends’, as Conrad ducks to enter the cabin, carries the echo of its earlier use as he recommits to the homosocial collective. It is a less-remarked counterweight to the statement of defiant individualism that leads Conrad to disown remorse when captured by Seyd following the fire, where his is a ‘spirit burning but *unbent’* (II, 10, 334; emphasis added).

If Conrad’s departure shows him torn, it is between his heart ‘form’d for softness’ (III, 23, 662), yielding to emotional dependency on a woman, and his masculine independence. That independence is not felt most strongly in isolation but in company. In Canto II, the same softness instigates the action that leads to the tragic death of Medora and the murder of Seyd by Gulnare. The rescue of Gulnare, Seyd’s concubine, and the other haram women, from the inferno leads to the fatal delay that precipitates Conrad’s defeat and capture. When Conrad is then freed from imprisonment by Gulnare, his refusal to kill Seyd in his sleep leads Gulnare to commit murder for him. Eventually rescued by his men, Conrad returns home to find Medora dead, apparently from delirium of grief at the thought of Conrad’s death. As Anna Camilleri comments, Conrad’s ‘masculinity has been challenged by Gulnare’s resolve in the face of his reluctance’ to act. His chivalry in saving the haram women is rewarded with the imprisonment that delays his return to Medora and triggers her death. Camilleri rightly notes that Conrad is unmanned by ‘incarceration in the seraglio, where enforced passivity is understood as a feminine and *feminizing* experience’.[[15]](#endnote-15) It compromises his manly independence and his horror at Gulnare’s deed simultaneously shatters his ideals of womanhood, but Byron indicates that the perceived tragedy arises not just from Conrad’s lack of firmness in this moment but from the wider failure of the functions of male comradeship. Two parallel scenes of rescue, established either side of the freeing of the seraglio and the murder of Seyd, but of very different nature, suggest as much. Both return to the ‘nick-of-time’ motif of the masculine adventure story.

Having first infiltrated Seyd’s chambers disguised as the Dervise, Conrad’s identity is revealed when the signal conflagration is lit too soon. Immediately his call for reinforcements is answered:

He …

from his baldric drew

His bugle – brief the blast – but shrilly blew;

’Tis answered – ‘Well ye speed my gallant crew!

Why did I deem design had left me single here?’ (II, 4, 165-69)

The rapid response of his comrades secures Conrad’s initial success. The third Canto is, in contrast, a tale of belatedness. Those who survived the first attack return home to ‘council’ (III, 4, 123) and commit to return to rescue their chief, restating the theme of heroism-against-the-odds that derives not from a sense of individuality but the collective: ‘Woe to his foes! there yet survive a few, / Whose deeds are daring, as their hearts are true’ (I, 4, 129-30). The narrative of the third Canto is dominated by Gulnare’s murder of Seyd, but this action diverts attention from the framing device of the return of these gallant comrades. Occasional reminders of the fact recur in Conrad’s thoughts as he awaits torture and death, first concerned to end his life ‘With not a friend to animate, and tell / To other ears that death became thee well’ (III, 6, 228-29), and then in despair which is felt ‘As if some faithless friend had spurned his groan’ (III, 7, 269). Securing his escape with Gulnare, ‘He thought of all – Gonsalvo and his band, / His fleeting triumph and his failing hand’ (III, 13, 460-61), but what interrupts these sustaining thoughts of male bonding is the disturbing presence of ‘Gulnare, the homicide!’ (III, 13, 463).

Departing under fire from Seyd’s men, the culmination of the framing plot arrives in the form of the pirate crew and the tone and values expressed allow Conrad to reassume the pose of manly independence amongst men that Gulnare’s action had put in jeopardy.

‘’Tis mine – my blood-red flag!

Again – again – I am not all deserted on the main!’

They own the signal, answer to the hail,

Hoist out the boat at once, and slacken sail.

‘’Tis Conrad! Conrad!’ shouting from the deck,

Command nor duty could their transport check!

With light alacrity and gaze of pride,

They view him mount once more his vessel’s side;

A smile relaxing in each rugged face,

Their arms can scarce forbear a rough embrace.

He, half forgetting danger and defeat,

Returns their greeting as a chief may greet,

Wrings with a cordial grasp Anselmo’s hand,

And feels he yet can conquer and command! (III, 15, 492-505)

As in earlier expressions of camaraderie, the rough physicality of the embrace and handshake seals Conrad’s sense of liberty to command. And yet, this time the roughhousing fails to mask the incongruous presence of Gulnare who accompanies Conrad onto the ship, and the fact that Conrad’s rescue was not secured by his men who arrived too late to avert a double tragedy – Gulnare becoming a ‘homicide’ and the death of Medora. Gulnare’s murderous deed is more obviously damaging not only to Conrad, but to the precarious world of comradeship, than was Selim’s backward glance to Zuleika that seals his doom. Gulnare, in this reading, intervenes in a story that *should* have been resolved, one way or another, through the actions of men alone. In *The Bride of Abydos* this was the case – ultimately Selim’s revolt fails and he is slain by Giaffir.Not only does Gulnare act where Conrad fails to, but she also adopts the role of those who would liberate him. Gulnare does not just problematise Conrad’s sense of his own individual masculine identity but, more troublingly, the collective action of male comradeship. Despite the romance of male bonding, the narrative of *The Corsair* is defined by failures at the heart of comradeship as much as the inner conflict, self-division and torment that we have long associated with the isolated, alienated Byronic Hero.

Comradeship is celebrated in *The Bride of Abydos* and *The Corsair* as part of a world of adventure, but it cannot hold at bay tragedy, and in some senses an overstrong faith in masculine fellowship, which cannot accommodate a rounded masculine identity that admits an awareness of its fragility, precipitates that tragedy. This is also the spirit of the tragic action witnessed in *Marino Faliero*, which focuses on comradeship as conspiracy. The plot is driven by the insulting remarks about Faliero’s younger wife, Angiolina, that Michel Steno scrawls on the ducal chair. Expecting severe redress from the judicial authority of the Forty, the Doge is thrown into turmoil by what he perceives as the leniency of Steno’s sentence: ‘I ask’d no remedy but from the law, / I sought no vengeance but redress by law’ (I, i, 112-13). Just as Selim revels in the spirit of his ‘lawless brood’, Faliero is motivated to seek vengeance from outside the law. He unites with a group of conspirators led by Israel Bertuccio and Philip Calendaro who plot to overthrow the state. Faliero quickly adopts similar aims, desiring to liberate the Venetian people from the autocratic power of the Forty. Freedom will be secured by a small group of comrades, as Faliero takes on the role of the incorruptible repudiator of a decadent and unfit state that is the hallmark of the ideals of comradeship: ‘I will redeem [the city] / … By sweet revenge on all that’s base in Venice, / And freedom to the rest’ (I, ii, 590-93).

In an echo of Selim, Faliero’s noble purpose in liberating the people sits uneasily with his own personal motives of revenge against the Forty. His immersion in the world of Bertuccio’s men is also incomplete as he joins them as an outsider:

There is a certain Philip Calendaro

Now in the Arsenal, who holds command

Of eighty men, and has great influence

Besides on all the spirits of his comrades. (II, i, 136-39)

Bertuccio warns that the sign of comradeship is collective purpose and not individual gain: ‘We will not strike for private wrongs alone: / Such are for selfish passions and rash men’ (II, ii, 14-15). Byron builds tension through demonstrating the risks involved in the conspiracy of comrades and the fragility of the bonds that hold them together. Calendaro fears the risks of joining company with the Doge: ‘have you dared to peril your friends’ lives / On a rash confidence in one we know not?’ (I, ii, 152-53). The Doge’s induction into the group is affirmed in the language of comrades-in-arms or a band of brothers: ‘It is time to name him. / Our comrades are even now prepared to greet him / In brotherhood’ (III, ii, 83-85).

But brotherhood is not only a matter of leaguing with Bertuccio’s conspirators for Faliero. Despite the wounds caused by Steno’s slur, the plot gathers momentum from Faliero’s greater feelings of betrayal by those adjudicating in the Forty whom he once considered comrades:

All these men, or their fathers, were my friends

Till they became my subjects; then fell from me

As faithless leaves drop from the o’erblown flower.

All left me a lone blighted thorny stalk,

Which in its solitude can shelter nothing.

…

All these men were my friends: I loved them, they

Requited honourably my regards;

We served and fought; we smiled and wept in concert;

We revell’d or we sorrow’d side by side. (III, ii, 307-11, 319-22)

Solitude is the absence of camaraderie in Faliero’s lament for lost affiliations: ‘Farewell all social memory! All thoughts / In common! And sweet bonds which link old friendships’ (III, ii, 327-28). The drama hinges less on Faliero’s stubbornness than on the transition from one group of comrades to another that is, as with Selim’s group of pirates, representative of a wider social spectrum. Even so, Faliero’s adopted role of independent repudiator of the corrupt state reveals his own dependence on the values associated with the comradeship of his youth.

What would break the momentum towards the tragedy of Faliero’s execution and those of his co-conspirators would be to follow the advice of Angiolina who is able, like Medora, to counsel an alternative. ‘Remember what you were’ (II, i, 482), she advises, invoking Faliero’s victory at Zara as the basis of his reputation. What prevents Faliero from following this advice is not really his sense of affront at the punishment of Steno, but his persistent adherence to the values of comradeship which are, once again, shown to allow for a limited type of manly independence that turns out to be flawed and self-destructive.

By the time Byron used the word ‘comrades’ in the subtitle to *The Island*, he had, as we have seen, a long history of exploring the subject, usually in contexts that have been neglected due to explorations of the Byronic Hero that have viewed independence as isolation rather than as the experience of being part of a masculine group opposed to the wrongs of contemporary social and political life. *The Island*, as has been argued by Bernard Beatty, overturns earlier ideas of the Byronic Hero by opposing the individuation of one Hero-type, Fletcher Christian, with a manifestation of the Byronic Hero, Torquil, who, rather than adhere to the self-destructive energies of defiance and revenge, is instead willing to yield to a different type of community in the form of the islanders of Toobonai and his lover Neuha.[[16]](#endnote-16) That yielding looks back to Medora’s appeal to Conrad to embrace ‘peace’, something which his independence prevents him from doing, but it is also a return to and culmination of the themes of comradeship that were present in the earlier tales.

Hence, in *The Island* Fletcher Christian, the mutineer who overthrows Captain Bligh, before finally being killed in a standoff with the British navy who come to capture him for court martial, is a man whose jeopardy is shared by a band of faithful comrades. These figures, as we saw in *The Corsair*, are deliberately named by Byron. As Matthew Ward remarks, ‘All of the men in the poem draw on qualities of the Byronic Hero, but in so doing illustrate the flexibility and capaciousness of what can sometimes be viewed as a one-dimensional figure’.[[17]](#endnote-17) What affirms these multiple dimensions is, I would argue, the way the characters relate to each other as comrades. It is the way that these men interact that develops the sparser lineaments of comradeship from the earlier tales.

Resisting the first attack, we are told ‘Few, few’ of the mutineers ‘escaped’ (III, 1, 11). At the heart of a defiant bunch who refuse to leave Toobonai stands Fletcher Christian. Recalling the aloofness of earlier Byronic Heroes, he stands ‘with his arms across his chest /… Still as a statue with his lips comprest’ (III, 4, 86-91). He is accompanied by Ben Bunting, who represents a stoic resilience and functional dependency, ‘Rough as a bear, but willing as a brother’ (III, 4, 104), who binds the injured Torquil’s wounds before he ‘calmly lit his pipe’ (III, 4, 106). Bunting’s earthiness is contrasted by the restlessness of Jack Skyscrape, who

Walked up and down – at times would stand, then stoop,

To pick a pebble up – then let it drop –

Then hurry as in haste – then quickly stop –

Then cast his eyes on his companions – then

Whistle half a tune, and pause again. (III, 4, 110-14)

Rather than proper names, these titles are evocative of nicknames, indicative of long association: Skyscrape suggests height or perhaps a role as lookout; Bunting suggests a songbird and song. Torquil adopts the role of youth, earlier assigned to Gonsalvo in *The Corsair*. Skyscrape’s futile ‘G—d damn!’ (III, 5, 125) and Bunting’s response – he ‘merely added to the oath his *eyes*’ (III, 5, 136) – foregrounds a desperate sense of mutual understanding of their peril and yet a refusal to yield to capture.

From this masculine silence, however, Torquil’s wounds call forth Christian’s compassion:

I must fall; but have you strength to fly?

’Twould be some comfort still, could you survive;

Our dwindled band is now too few to strive.

Oh! for a sole canoe! though but a shell,

To bear you hence to where a hope may dwell!

For, my lot is what I sought; to be,

In life or death, the fearless and the free. (III, 6, 158-64)

Despite ending on a characteristic note of self-mastery, this is also a remarkably tender and affectionate moment. Most significantly, perhaps, the roughhousing and manly handshakes of Conrad and his men, are replaced here by a gesture that is much more intimate in its nature, as Christian ‘Seized [Torquil’s] hand wistfully, but did not press, / And shrunk as fearful of his own caress’ (III, 6, 149-50).

What is different in *The Island* is that, while Christian and his comrades still represent the roles of independent repudiators of the corruption of Western society, symbolising ‘feeling, honour, integrity and loyalty’,[[18]](#endnote-18) key signs of manly independence, their autonomy is set alongside the island community of Toobonai, which provides a compelling answer not just to a wider community but also to the failure that so often besets masculine comradeship in Byron’s works which can only repudiate perceived corruption and not build lasting alternatives. For this reason, Neuha is described in contrast to precisely the kind of social world, occupied by ‘vain lord[s] of wantonness and ease’ (I, 1, 11), that Conrad’s pirate community challenged in *The Corsair*:

Rapt in the fond forgetfulness of life,

Neuha, the South Sea girl, was all a wife,

With no distracting world to call her off

From love; with no society to scoff

At the new transient flame; no babbling crowd,

Of coxcombry in admiration loud,

Or with adulterous whisper to alloy her duty. (II, 14, 332-38)

This is a different type of independence than previously expressed in tales of the Byronic Hero, and it symbolically accompanies a refashioning of independence that has long been recognised in the poem as a significant updating of the Byronic Hero.[[19]](#endnote-19) Rather than defiantly resist acts of dependency, specifically on women, Torquil, as has been observed, differs from Selim, Conrad and Marino Faliero, by submitting to Neuha’s guidance in the final pursuit, swimming to the subaqueous cave that saves his life in an act of faith that eschews the rigid adherence to independence characterised by the earlier heroes.[[20]](#endnote-20) This represents a remodelling of manly independence that does fully admit that true individuality can only be achieved through willingness to depend on another, but this is realised through first testing the limits of independence and dependence that characterise comradeship.

In *The Island*, the embrace of, or submission to, the will of a sustainable community is not just a rejection of heroic isolation or independence – as we find in Christian’s last stand – but also a termination of the allure of the comradeship that provides a bedrock for that independence. What has not been remarked is the moment that immediately precedes this, which mirrors the failure of comradeship – the failure to arrive in the ‘nick-of-time’ of the earlier tales – that seems to characterise Christian’s hopeless wish for a ‘sole canoe’ to rescue Torquil. Whereas Gulnare’s murder of Seyd can be ascribed to the failure of Conrad’s men to liberate him in time, in *The Island* the role that a group of comrades ought to play is replaced by Neuha herself, who outdoes Christian’s wish for a ‘sole canoe’, instead arriving with a group of ‘barks, like small birds through a lowering sky’ (III, 7, 180), to effect Torquil’s escape. Rather than conflict with and disrupt their progress, Neuha fully and successfully *replaces* the actions and associational bonds of a group of comrades, leading to the final rescue of Torquil. There is nothing belated about her arrival which does come in the nick of time.

What we also don’t find in Torquil, as he dives to follow Neuha to her cave, is any sense of the backward glance that is presented as weakness in the face of camaraderie. The backward look here would, of course, be directed towards, and not away from, the flawed social bonds of comradeship found in the earlier tales and critiqued so strongly in *Marino Faliero*. But we are told ‘[t]here was no time to pause’ (IV, 4, 61); it is a sign of Byron’s movement beyond the inner conflict that seemed to draw the earlier Byronic Hero in opposite directions. Torquil does face a profound moment of choice before his greater moment of submersion at the end of Canto II when Ben Bunting comes to find him, announcing ‘You are wanted’ (II, 21, 523). Torquil responds: ‘“That’s but fair; / And if it were not, mine is not the soul / To leave my comrades helpless on the shoal’ (II, 21, 523-25). This is a backward look towards the earlier choices of the Byronic Hero, but it is now as much thematic as it is a plot device, as *The Island* reflects back upon the themes of comradeship that accompany the Byronic Hero. Significantly, and unlike Fletcher Christian, Torquil is able to commit fully to rescue by Neuha and the islanders without having to renounce his comrades.

In *The Island*, Byron draws together the threads of the earlier stories of the Byronic Hero to provide a final word not just on the damage wreaked by ‘isolated figures, unconnected to their surroundings’,[[21]](#endnote-21) but on a subject about which he is more ambivalent. That is the subject of comradeship. Christian is a character, like earlier heroes, who cannot let go of his resentment, which leads to self-isolation and, as Beatty remarks, Torquil’s comrades end up ‘guilty, punished or dead’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Byron is clear that he viewed such self-isolation, by the time he came to write *The Island*, as nothing but self-destructive. At the same time, the equally dominant motif of comradeship in tales of the Byronic Hero is rejected as unworkable and unsustainable in contrast to the different type of cultural repudiation represented by Neuha and the islanders of Toobonai. And yet, if in this final iteration of the Byronic Hero, we discern comradeship’s rejection, which is a comment upon some of Byron’s earlier celebrations of masculine bonding, it is also worth reemphasising that the associational bonds of comradeship were never so intimately drawn by Byron as in that moment when he depicts Christian’s affection for Torquil and his men. It is a surprisingly touching farewell to old comrades.

1. [Walter Scott] *Quarterly Review* XVI, 31 (October 1816, issued February 1817), pp.172-208 (p. 183). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in Martin Garrett, *The Palgrave Literary Dictionary of Byron* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010),p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Deborah Lutz, ‘The Pirate Poet in the Nineteenth Century: Trollope and Byron’, in Grace Moore, (ed.), *Pirates and Mutineers of the Nineteenth Century: Swashbucklers and Swindlers* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 23-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Thomas Dixon, ‘“Emotion”: The History of a Keyword in Crisis’, *Emotion Review*, 4.4 (2012), pp. 338-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile: Romantic and Victorian Writers in Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Byron uses the word ‘community’ in description of the Nottingham framebreakers in a letter to Lord Holland of 25 February 1812, in a letter to Murray about monks of the Armenian monastery where Byron worked on his English-Armenian Dictionary, and twice about his feelings towards Leigh Hunt, writing to Moore that, despite seeing Hunt semi-regularly following Shelley’s death, he did not ‘have much communion or community with him’. See *BLJ*, II, 165, *BLJ*, V, 158, *BLJ*, X, 69 and *BLJ*, X, 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Emily Bernhard Jackson, ‘Plunging into the Crowd: Islands and Selves in Byron’, in Alistair Heys and Vitana Kostadinova (eds), *Byron and the Isles of Imagination: A Romantic Chart* (Plovdiv: Context, 2009), 107-34 (117-18) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, repr. 2011), p. 2 This is how Byron understood his politics, writing to John Hanson about his preference for independence: ‘I shall stand aloof, speak what I think, but not often, nor too soon, I will preserve my independence, if possible, but if involved with a party, I will take care not to be the last or least in the Ranks’ (*BLJ*, I, 185). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. McCormack, *The Independent Man*, p. 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. McCormack, *The Independent Man*, p.164. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Rolf P. Lessenich, *Romantic Disillusionism and the Sceptical Tradition* (Bonn: Bonn University Press), 2017, p.198. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002), p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Wim Tigges, ‘A Glorious Thing: The Byronic Hero as Pirate Chief’, in C.C. Barfoot, Theo D’haen and Erik Kooper (eds), *Configuring Romanticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopoi, 2003), 153-172 (157). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Anna Camilleri, ‘Gender and Genre in the Turkish Tales (1813-16)’, in Jonathon Shears and Alan Rawes (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Lord Byron* (Oxford: oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 33-47 (p.39). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Bernard Beatty, *Byron’s* Don Juan (Abingdon: Routledge, repr. 2016), p.158. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Matthew Ward, ‘Byron’s Poetic Endings: *the Deformed Transformed*, *The Vision of Judgment*, *The Island*, and “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year’, in Shears and Rawes (eds), *The Oxford handbook of Lord Byron*, pp. 203-17 (p. 212). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. McCormack, *The Independent Man*, p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See, for example, Beatty’s *Byron’s* Don Juan, pp. 158-61 and Jerome J. McGann’s *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 186-202. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. McGann, *Fiery Dust*, p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Bernhard Jackson, p. 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Beatty, *Byron’s* Don Juan, p. 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)