Medical History

Childe Harolde: Father to Lord Byron?

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If Byron had not existed, it would have been impossible to invent him: to have created a character in fiction to match Byron would have been to stretch credulity to absurdity. And yet behind the charisma, the brouhaha, and the myth there lurks a man, a very extraordinary man, a genius maybe, but a man nevertheless, whose character, image, personality, or what-have-you is compounded, as in lesser mortals, from elements derived from his heredity and his environment; from his nature and his nurture.

The study of personality is my business: the study of Byron a major interest. To combine these two preoccupations has always been my intent, but it needed the spur of the 150th anniversary of the poet's death this year to get on with the job. I have no illusions about the task I have set myself, but I draw comfort from the fact that it is just because Byron was himself so very extraordinary that whatever pathology there may be either in his heredity or in his environment, or both, would be gross and, therefore, easily demonstrable. Furthermore, fortunately for me, there is available a wealth of unimpeachable biographical, autobiographical, and other documentary evidence covering his brief life. Even so, I am all too aware of the traps for the unwary in the retrospective psychiatric interpretation of such evidence. So I will tread very softly lest I tread on the corns, if not the dreams, of Byron's idolators.

What of Byron's heredity? There is evidence enough that there was rot in more than a few branches of his family tree. Nicknames, particularly pejorative ones, are usually well deserved. It is not without significance that so many of Byron's male antecedents bore such names. "The wicked lord," from whom Byron inherited his title and estates, was a great uncle. He was foul-tempered, irascible, and spiteful to a degree. Such was his reputation and his behaviour that Horace Walpole after once meeting him was heard to remark, "the present Lord Byron is a madman." Byron's grandfather, a feckless vice-admiral, earned for himself the name-tag, "foulweather Jack." Captain John Byron, the poet's father, could today have been easily classified as a psychopath. Because of his violent temper and financial irresponsibility he became known as "mad Jack." True to type, he scandalized society by his elopement with the wife of Lord Carmarthen, and it was said that he was responsible for her death in 1784 shortly after the birth of Augusta, Byron's half-sister. Captain Byron's grief, if indeed he was capable of any such sentiment, was short-lived. He set his cap at Miss Gordon of Gight, who was to be the poet's mother,

Byron in Albanian Dress. (Painting by Thomas Phillips. Reproduced by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.)

attracted not by her beauty or charm, which she had in very short measure, but by her one and only asset—a not inconsiderable fortune. The marriage was predictably a disaster. He died apparently by his own hand in 1791 having squandered his wife's fortune and subjected her to every form of physical and social degradation.

Byron's antecedents on the female side are marginally less unfortunate, but bad enough in all conscience. His mother was a Gordon descended from a long line of well-born brigands, notorious for their violence and impulsiveness, characteristics she herself inherited in plenty.

From an hereditary standpoint, therefore, it seems clear that whatever other assets may have come his way stability and equanimity were not likely to be counted among them. Even so, it has been shown that, given the right environmental circumstances, the hereditary mark of Cain can be counter-balanced. But Byron was as miserably unlucky in his nurture, particularly in his earliest formative period, as he was in his nature.

Mother and Son

The "broken home" obtained in Byron's case. "Mad Jack" died when Byron was but 3 years old and he can have had little, if any, conscious recollection of him. In effect, he was an absentee father who on his rare visits to the matrimonial home succeeded in creating greater chaos in what was

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already a chaotic atmosphere. To add to the insecurity occasioned by the absence of a corporeal father, Pelion was heaped on Ossa by the creation of a phantom father in whom all evil and wickedness were invested, by the joint efforts of his mother and the two harpies, Agnes and May Gray, her maids. "You little dog. You're a thorough Byron: you are just as bad as your father," is an example of his mother's cruel, irresponsible type of reproof during one of her violent rages. And yet there were times when she became over-solicitous about his welfare, so adding to the uncertainty of her real feelings towards him.

If anything, the mother-son relationship deteriorated as Byron grew older, to a point where his holidays from school became a nightmare. In 1804 he wrote to Augusta, his half-sister and now confidante, "Am I to call this woman mother? Because by nature's law she has authority over me, am I to be trampled upon in this manner? Am I to be goaded with insult, loaded with obloquy? I owe her respect as a son, but I renounce her as a friend. What example does she show me! I hope in God I shall never follow it."

In addition to their role as maids to Mrs. Byron, the sisters Agnes and May Gray served as nurses to young Byron. Their influences could have been nothing but malignant. May in particular exemplified hypocritical Calvinism at its worst. She was well versed in the Bible, especially those purple passages to do with the rewards of sin. For the bed-time stories of more fortunate children she substituted hair-raising ghost stories. Mr. Hanson, the poet's attorney, wrote to Mrs. Byron to "apprize you of the proceedings of your servant Mrs. Gray." Byron then aged 10 had told him, "... that she was perpetually beating him and that his bones sometimes ached from it: that she brought all sorts of Company of the lowest Description into his apartments. . . ."

In favourable circumstances schoolmasters may act as father-surrogates and in this respect young Byron was less fortunate than most. His earliest education was in Scotland, where at that time schools were famed for their physical discomfort and the rigours of their religious instruction—that is, more Sin and Satan. Though recognized as intelligent at Aberdeen Grammar School, he received little encouragement and seems to have been left to his own devices. At Harrow for the first time he came under the influence of someone in authority who was both stern and just. He became the "untamed colt led by the silken cord of Dr. Drury," the headmaster. But he was then 13½ and by that time irreparable damage had been done.

Lameness

No account of Byron's psychopathology would be complete without a mention of his lameness. The precise diagnosis is still disputed, but whatever it may have been he was, from a functional standpoint, only minimally handicapped. He was, after all, a superb swimmer, an average fencer and boxer, and a competent horseman. But for one as narcissistic as he was to be maimed and imperfect, no matter in what degree, was intolerable. What served to aggravate the trauma a thousandfold was the inhuman treatment he was subjected to ostensibly to correct the deformity, and, to add salt to the wound, the jeering and taunting he received—even from his mother. "A lame brat," was the most hurtful of the many epithets she hurled at him.

It is difficult to imagine a more pathological environment than the one the young poet was raised in, an environment indeed that could widen the cracks in his hereditary equipment to a point where what defences he had began to give way and deviant behaviour, neurotic, or even psychotic symptoms were allowed to seep through. Evidence of just this course of events is tragically plentiful.

That Byron who had known so much fear in infancy

should be plagued in adult life by overt symptoms of pathological anxiety is in no way surprising. He was haunted by insomnia. When he did fall asleep he was tormented by nightmares, from which he would awaken in such a state of terror that he would summon his manservant, Fletcher, to reassure him and calm him down. He gnawed his nails unmercifully; the contrast between them and his otherwise well-shaped, well-kept hands must have been striking, and to him painful. In later life he could not be separated from his pistols, which he kept under his pillow at night and on his person during the day. There were times when he had recourse to opiates. In a letter dated 18 March, 1808, he wrote to his friend, John Cam Hobhouse, "The Game is almost up, for these last five days I have been confined to my room. Laudanum is my sole support."

His tolerance of frustration was low, with the result that if thwarted he would fly into tempestuous rages, which despite the hopes he expressed in his letter to Augusta were a pretty fair facsimile of those of his unstable mother. He had never in his formative years been inculcated with a sense of loyalty, which might well explain his own disloyalty. A good example is his treatment of his guardian, Lord Carlisle. Originally he intended to pay him a gracious compliment in *English Bards* with

"On one alone Apollo deigns to smile
And crowns a new Roscommon in Carlisle"

Later in order to satisfy a vicious whim the couplet is altered to read

"No Muse will cheer, with renovating smile,
The paralytic puling of Carlisle"

His cavalier treatment of Lady Caroline Lamb, and indeed his wife, among others he became involved with could also be interpreted in the context of disloyalty, though obviously there were other factors at work. He had never been exposed to altruism, so that throughout his life he remained self-centred, vain, and arrogantly conceited. It could well be that, like his romanticism, his defence of the principle of nationalism was only half sincere. It could be indeed that his active support of the Italians and Greeks in their fight for self-determination was inspired by his ambition to re-live the life of his crusading ancestors rather than an earnest effort to help the oppressed throw off their shackles.

Revolt Against Authority

Conceivably his revolt against the earliest form of authority, that of his mother, is echoed in his rebellion against all forms of established authority: the political system, the social systems, the Royal House, and, what in the light of his upbringing, he might be expected to accept as the highest authority—God. Thus, politically he was an advanced Whig. In his first speech in the House of Lords he took up the cause of the "framebreakers" of Nottingham, a defence in point of fact of the wage-earners against the tyranny of the manufacturers. Napoleon, the arch-rebel, was his life-long hero: he made no secret of his support of Bonaparte even when the Allies had invaded France.

His sympathy lay with the under-dog, not only in a socio-economic sense (for hadn't the hobbling little gamin of Aberdeen been very much the under-dog?). He made so bold as to attack the Prince Regent openly in the *Corsair* for his treatment of his daughter, Princess Charlotte, herself the victim of an insufferable parent-child relationship:

"Weep, daughter of a royal line,
A Sire's disgrace, a realm's decay;
Ah! happy if each tear of thine
Could wash a father's fault away!"

He leaned heavily towards agnosticism but the perverted

Calvinism, the "torments of hell-fire" in which he had been raised, was not easily eradicated. To the end of his days Byron had an acute awareness of sin—and he was a very determined sinner—which he described eloquently as "the nightmare of my own delinquencies." He was, therefore, immoral rather than amoral.

Nevertheless, it is, I believe, in his psychosexual development, or maldevelopment, that the root cause of the Byronic tragedy is to be found. In the psychological sense Byron lacked a father, nor did a father-surrogate materialize in his crucial, formative years. Even the phantom father created for him by his mother was an ogre. She herself was ogre-like and responsible for the grimly unhappy relationship with her son. In the absence of precepts, guide lines, and sources of identification normally provided by parents or their surrogates, Byron was left to navigate the hazardous seas of his early psychosexual development without compass or rudder—and was shipwrecked. The ultimate destination, that of full heterosexual development fitting him for a lasting relationship as in marriage, was never reached. He was, in other words, sexually immature and remained so. This is perhaps an explanation of his "polymorphperversity," by which is meant an attempt on his part to find sexual gratification with partners irrespective of their age or sex. There is thus evidence of his indulgence in about the whole spectrum of sexual deviancy from homosexuality to gerontophilia.

In his affairs with women of all social classes, excessive even by the libertine standards of the times, there is more than a suggestion of desperation. In every Don Juan—and ironically Byron showed it to the nth degree—there is a need to pursue women relentlessly in the hope that one at least will afford him sexual gratification. In another letter addressed to his friend Hobhouse in 1808 he says, "I am buried in an abyss of sensuality. . . . I am at this moment under a course of restoration by Pearson's prescription . . . for a debility occasioned by too frequent Connection."

There can be little doubt of Byron's homosexuality, another manifestation of psychosexual immaturity. At Harrow and later at Cambridge he surrounded himself with attractive boys and young men. For example, at Cambridge he had a relationship with a humble chorister, John Edleston, for whom, as he later put it, he had "a violent though pure love and passion." Similarly, he became involved with Nicolo Giraud, a humble Levantine he met in Athens.

Marriage

His ill-fated marriage is proof enough of his unsuitability for a heterosexual relationship of any permanency. His wife, Annabella, was desirable in every respect and eminently suited to be his wife. Yet to have to live with her intimately and permanently was intolerable. It is pertinent to note that it is towards the end of his brief married life that his anxiety neurosis—if that is what his manifold symptoms amounted to—suffered an acute exacerbation. His sanity was called into question. Byron had sufficient insight to state openly that it was his marriage that was nearly driving him out of his senses. It was at this time too that his friends feared lest he should take his life.

It is most significant that the only women in whose presence he felt at peace were those who, in fact or phantasy, combined the attributes of a mistress and a mother; someone to whom he could turn for love, comfort, security, and solace when he was troubled and sorely tried—the eternal child-mother situation in effect.

Fact and phantasy are combined in his relationship with Lady Oxford, a woman almost 20 years his senior, with whom, after escaping from the clutches of Lady Caroline Lamb, he lived in idyllic bliss throughout the autumn of 1812. Phantasy replaces fact, but only just, in his association with Lady Melbourne, his long-standing adviser and

confidante. She was almost 40 years Byron's senior, but the nature of their relationship is poignantly revealed in a letter he addressed to Lady Blessington in which he writes, "Lady Melbourne, who might have been my mother, excited an interest in my feelings that few young women have been able to awaken."

Of Augusta, was it fact or phantasy? Though the evidence seems pretty conclusive that the relationship was incestuous, who can be absolutely sure? The fact remains that he was more deeply and constantly in love with her than with any other women in his life. Apologists for Augusta, working, however, from far different premises, maintained that her attitude towards Byron was that of a mother. I believe them to be right. For Byron she was a mother figure par excellence. She was older than he, his sole remaining female blood relative, the co-inheritor of the Byronic heritage. She was sympathetic, understanding, affectionate, and loyal. It is, to me, understandable, that, despite the sure knowledge that he was committing social suicide, he was compelled irresistibly to continue his association with her. He says in his profoundly moving *Epistle to Augusta*

"For thee, my own sweet sister, in thy heart
I know myself secure, as thou in mine;
We were and are—I am, even as thou art—
Beings who ne'er each other can resign;
It is the same, together or apart—
From life's commencement to its slow decline
We are entwined—let Death come slow or fast,
The tie which bound the first endures the last!"

It is worthy of note and gratifying to me that Bertrand Russell in his perceptive account of Byron in his *History of Western Philosophy* arrives at virtually the same conclusion. He writes, "His shyness and sense of friendlessness made him look for comfort in love-affairs, but as he was unconsciously seeking a mother rather than a mistress, all disappointed him except Augusta."

It is not for me to pronounce judgement on Byron either in respect of his relationship with Augusta, or in respect of the wider social implications of his abnormal behaviour. That would be encroaching on the field of ethics and morals, which is not my province. My brief is to offer an explanation, but not an excuse, for what he was and for what he did.

Byron himself was acutely aware of his heritage in which wickedness played such a prominent part. He considered that he was inescapably predestined by an evil fate, perhaps in a Calvinistic way by the Almighty, to follow his ancestors down the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire. But this may well be his rationalization of inner forces of which he was consciously unaware. Furthermore, to accept such an explanation would be to negate entirely our presentday understanding of psychodynamics. It is my contention—and I have been at pains to illustrate my thesis—that with all of us, as with Byron, life is a continuum and that things ill begun by the damaged seed of heredity are made worse by the poor soil of environment.

The child is father to the man: Childe Harold is father to Lord Byron. But, nevertheless, one can never be too sure. There are often times when paternity is called into question.

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