Stony Brook University

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

"What, after *all*, are *all* things — but a *show*?":

Byron and the Legacy of Literary Celebrity

A Thesis Presented

by

Kathrine Elaheh Hedayat

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

December 2012

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Kathrine Elaheh Hedayat

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this thesis.

Peter J. Manning – Thesis Advisor
Professor of English

Michael Tondre – Second Reader
Assistant Professor of English

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

Dedication Page

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved mother, Kelly Bua. Without her support and guidance, this article would not have been written.

Abstract of the Thesis

"What, after _all_, are _all_ things — but a _show_?":

Byron and the Legacy of Literary Celebrity

by

Kathrine Elaheh Hedayat

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

2012

This article follows the ascension of Lord Byron, widely regarded as the first living literary celebrity. The process by which this status was constructed shall be documented and analyzed, as well as Byron's cultural legacy. The practices of fan culture during the nineteenth century in response to Byron are analyzed alongside contemporary fan practices. The phenomenon of Byromania and the Byronic are examined alongside the evolution of literary celebrity into its modern form, tracing back to Byron's initial efforts.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

It isn't too difficult to imagine the commotion of the award ceremony red carpet. Celebrities step out of dark limousines onto crowded city streets, tides of screaming and adoring fans held back behind flimsy barriers. The agents of the media swarm with microphones and flashing cameras to ask, "Who are you wearing?" and "How does it feel to be here?" while women and men of reputation smile widely, pose for photographs and reply to the journalists sincerely. "It feels wonderful," they might say, or, "the head designer for Proenza Schouler came to my home to design my clothes," and the fans would admire, and scream, and enjoy the spectacle. Almost instantaneously, photos of the event would be available online on blogs and online newspapers and gossip sites. There would have been a live televised feed from the event, and there will be a "best" and "worst dressed list" feature on every cover of every tabloid available in every supermarket and bookseller by daybreak. In offices tomorrow, a worker will turn to her co-worker and say, "Did you see what so-and-so was wearing last night?" and "Did you hear about the after-party?" These are the operations of our modern celebrity culture. To expose the gears and moving parts of that machine, we must inspect this phenomenon at every level.

If there is a personality you want to see or learn about, gathering information about that person is as easy as typing their name into a search engine and pressing "enter." Instantly, your computer screen will be flooded with biographical information about that person, a chronological list of their accomplishments, news articles pertaining to their life and career, and, of course, photographs of them. Photos available by the hundreds (if not thousands) will be presented of any person of interest that the user requests to see. Any Internet user will be able to save those photographs, post them on blogging sites with their opinions, and view what others have written

and posted. Entire media empires have been built online with this very purpose—to provide "newsworthy" articles of celebrity personalities, photographs and opinions directly to the viewer. Fan culture on the Internet is a thriving and vibrant global community, broken up into infinitesimally small and specific factions. If one wanted to find a group online that was devoted to a certain style of music, that community would be available to them. If that same person wanted to find a community dedicated to a certain band or even to a specific person from a specific band, that person would be able to find and join in on their discussions.

Internet fandom is the modern expression of fanaticism, one driving force behind celebrity culture. If there were no fans interested in appreciating celebrities, the system would collapse. Our modern apparatus for perpetuating celebrity culture exists not only online but in the more traditional print publications such as the aforementioned tabloids and newspapers, though these mediums have also found life in the virtual sphere. This practice permeates the very fabric of our social lives—it is almost impossible to refuse to participate since the culture of celebrity is so wrapped up in the rest of our consumer culture. Encountering advertising and marketing is a daily part of life, right there next to eating and sleeping and breathing. These processes are so ingrained in our culture that they have become self-perpetuating. A person would not become a pariah for not recognizing and supporting certain celebrities, but to have no opinion on any person involved in celebrity culture would be a feat in itself.

Throsby writes, "critics have neglected the fact that the type of fan activity that is understood as being unique to the online age has its genesis, as a major cultural phenomenon, in reading practices of the Romantic period" (227). While this may not sit well in the minds of modern readers, rest assured, this article will put your skepticism to bed. A central figure in the study of literature, and one of the "big six" figures of the English Romantic movement, Lord

Byron has captured and pulled in, as if with a long, curling whip, the imaginations and attention of readers since the nineteenth century. The legacy of his particular brand of literary celebrity continues to flourish into the modern day. Following the ascension of Byron to fame and the nature of his fandom will not only inform us of Byron's impressive history, but provide a study of the successful literary personality and the cultural response. Wilson writes of Byron's celebrity, "in the case of Byron, the 'magical potency' of his name suggests a certain style and an attitude rather than the historical figure who lived between 1788 and 1824" (9). With a description like that, it is easy to see how Byron is regarded largely as the first living literary celebrity.

I.   The Struggle Between Literature and Life: Byron's Work

"Byron" means different things to different people, and Goldsmith says, "as a symbolic figure, Byron's meaning was unstable…and those meanings shifted over time" (31). Byron became a living myth. His name became more than a signifier for his person; instead a phenomenon took on the name of "Byron." Manning and Wolfson remark that "in his own lifetime Byron entered the lexicon as an adjective, a mode, a phenomenon" which is enough to suggest his incredible cultural importance (vii). It is highly unlikely to not have heard of Byron even in the twenty-first century; though in his time he was a literary lion, a true international celebrity. Byron's appeal was undeniable: he was a member of the English peerage, raised to the title of Baron at a young age, and was releasing volumes of poetry before he was even twenty years old. Byron, "caught between a middleclass Scottish childhood and an ancient English name… could do an imitation of ordinariness as well as stardom," writes Wilson on Byron's elevation to the title of the sixth Lord Byron (13). This divided identity allowed Byron to explore his tastes and appetites to great success, moral compass be damned.

His first volume, entitled *Hours of Idleness,* was the beginning of a literary career that would not explode like so many fireworks until March 10th, 1812 with the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. "After the first edition of 500 copies of *Childe Harold* sold out in a mere three days, fan letters began pouring in from readers who had fallen hard for the writer whose own sensibility they imagined in the fashionably melancholic Harold," Eric Eisner describes of Byron's initial conflagration of fame (20). Byron instantly became a

sensation. Though Byron publically denied his connection to Harold, Graham writes that "self-dramatization or self-creation through combined self-revelation and self-concealment" was Byron's strategy behind building characters like Harold and Juan (28). Byron's constant confusion in the eyes of the public whether his works were in any way autobiographical or not did nothing but increase his appeal. Now fans could conjecture and guess as to which parts of Byron's writing were fictive or imagined and which were "real" and applicable to his life. This air of mystery and obstruction would be a defining factor in determining the "Byronic" from thence on.

Byron and the "Byronic" are difficult to separate, and for the very reasons mentioned above Byron's identity can sometimes be obscured as if in a thick mist of his own making. Byron's identity is not only a construction of society's processing and reimagining, but of his own creation. Byron's myth is one that has been shaped and molded by the publishing industry and by fans and critics, reviewers and gossipers, but also by the action of writing, of creating himself through words and through his public image. Wilson recalls some literary heroes that are labeled "Byronic," such as Mr. Darcy, Mr. Rochester, Heathcliff, and Ladislaw from Eliot's *Middlemarch.* This is a seriously abbreviated list, and if all of the names of every character that has taken influence from Byron, or can be identified with the Byronic were mentioned, that list would probably eclipse this article twofold. These Byronic heroes, associated directly with Byron's public image are "more famous for their temperament than for any literary talent they may possess"(2). To think of Byron himself in this light is to ignore an incredibly masterful and impressive literary corpus and focus solely on the public construction that was his identity. Wilson states that Byron was used "as a yardstick for the heroic ideal of the mid-to late

nineteenth century" which certainly is a lot of pressure for an ordinary man's legacy, yet, as we are discovering, Byron was not an ordinary man.

Graham meditates on Byron as "a man reluctant to admit how fascinated he is by the making of his own myth" (24). The construction of Byron's public persona was definitely not a happy accident, instead Byron, like any good writer, studied society and was fascinated by the spectacle of the theatre. His "lifelong need to transcend limitation" brought him to understand that "every social being is an actor" (Graham, 26). Byron was constantly being compared and contrasted, reviewed and pulled apart by the media and by the public, and so he took his performance as Lord Byron very seriously. "He, like Hamlet, was staging the play of his own life," and with this staging came a highly conscious and cunning actor, devoted to his craft and his product (Graham, 44).

The poet purposely wrote himself into legend. He became a living myth, a construct intent on blurring of the lines between reality and the literary. McDayter conjectures that the presence of "a persistent and coherently gothic aura surrounding Byron and his work" lead to this solubility between reality and the literary. This exchange made "it possible for Byron's seduction of his readership to slip from the metaphorical to the literal" (47). Byron could dance to whichever tune the media could play, and more than often was the conductor of his own public spectacle. Byron's incredible control over his construction was more of a process of self-discovery, where the poet "began to look at the product of his labor and see neither his ideal self mirrored back to him by his adoring fans, nor the fulfillment of his desires for literary fame." Byron "could only come to terms with what it meant to be Byron-the-Poet in the early 1800's through the disorienting misrecognition of himself" in the media (McDayter, 45-6). McDayter's words are an incredible insight into the process of constructing an identity. Byron's concerns

were not only for his work, but for himself, for the "Byronic" in all of its meanings as so many of his fans and critics would be judging anything they could see or imagine about the poet. Byron, as the first living literary celebrity, was put into a crushing position where it became his responsibility to control his image in any way that he may.

The devotion to public image, however, may lead to thoughts following the path of a logical extreme-- that Byron compromised his artistic vision to construct this persona which was so hotly contested and revered by the public. McDayter reports that critics referred to Byron as a "pander and a whore to public taste," though Byron defended himself by stating that he would not "he said, 'be the slave to any appetite' and while that included the appetites of his lovers, it referred more particularly to his adoring 'fans'"(43-8). Conscious of his audience, Byron imagined his audiences as "insatiable beings who fed upon his literary corpus to satisfy their taste for the Byronic (McDayter, 43). This description of fan interaction with Byron and his work is purposefully suggestive and vampiric, as Byron's relationship with his fans is commonly described. Indeed, language of the monstrous and parasitic is strongly reminiscent of the Romantics in general, since the relationship with the reading public did not only affect Byron, though it did react with him in a volatile manner. McDayter is very thorough with documenting the descriptions of Byron's talent by critics, and she writes that "the most commonly used metaphor for his poetic power was magical, almost supernatural, enchantment" (47). So not only was Byron a constructor of his own myth, his relationship with his audience was one where his performance was so powerful it left critics with a feeling of having been tricked or ensnared by magical forces. Byron has been described as having been "hypnotically powerful," and "an exotic spectacle" with "the power to enthrall" (McDayter, 47, Manning,Wolfson xiii). His works

seemed to seduce the reader into the production that was the Byronic, both in terms of the literary and of his personal celebrity.

Another tactic Byron took full advantage of was to control his literal, physical image— his attention to his portraits and the clothing gave him another tool to wield in the construction of his personal myth. This may seem a trivial observation, but like our fixation with modern celebrity clothing, Byron was judged on his personal style as much as his poetry. Like Wilson's previous association with literary Byronic heroes, the aesthetic of the stereotypical poet is a separate entity from the being that actually writes. Kenyon Jones remarks on Byron's personal style, which was not always reflected in portraiture-- that he was "pursuing a certain refined sobriety of dress and [was] seeking to be the opposite of showy or extravagant" which is a curious choice by the poet to balance out his persona, so often described as wild and morally questionable (112). Not all of his portraits reflected this sober style of dress, as the famous portraits of Byron with his shirt open and this fantastically exotic portrait of Byron in Albanian dress will reflect. Kenyon Jones states that "he never wore an open-necked shirt in ordinary life," yet this is a style that Byron chose to have circulated through portraiture. As Manning and Wolfson note, "the portraits were engraved, widely reproduced and disseminated, as frontispieces, in annuals and images purchasable separately" (ix). With the wide distribution of Byron's image, he wisely controlled which images the public would associate with him.

Any modern celebrity would be able to tell you about the importance of one's visual image. Byron, being so interested in the manufacture of himself, "employed fashion, disguise and weight control as tools to work on the given material—his own face and body" (119). Some impressive statistics are that between "January 1812 and September 1813 he spent nearly £900 with one tailor alone, while in three months in 1812 he bought no less than 24 fine white quilted

8

waistcoats" (Kenyon Jones, 112). Byron's investment of money into his image is the most concrete proof of how integral controlling his image was to his process, and to his success. Byron constructed the image of "Byron" from the minutest detail of his coats and portraits, to the grander components, such as his incredible poetic talent and wit. Byron was so absorbed in the mechanics of identity production that he "reverses the commonly perceived nineteenth century dichotomy between the male as an active gazer and the female as the passive object of that gaze" (Kenyon Jones, 120). Byron's portraits invite the viewer to gaze, to commit Byron to a role of object, to consider him a subject of scrutiny and to be scrutinized. His portraits are also an invitation for that sort of relationship between viewer and viewed. His fantastic costumes draw the viewer's attention and in turn, "others' perceptions of him became an element in his subsequent presentation of himself" (123). The image of the poet is then fluid, being amended with each successive portrait. This is like an infinite looping of information, doubling back on itself again and again, changing incrementally each time. Byron's public display of style followed a natural evolution, much like something Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* would mention in reference to natural processes as "numerous, successive, slight modifications" (Otis, 266).

Byron's interest in self-representation, then, would factor into the larger type of the Byronic. Kenyon Jones writes that "the fact that the Romantic 'Byronic' look features a distinct thinness and even emaciation is thus a tribute to the rigid self-control its naturally chubby progenitor exercised for most of his life over eating" (119). Byron's identity was one of an artist, of a creator and of a controller, a person who shaped and was shaped. Byron's body, like his literary body, was one he exerted enormous effort to shape to his aesthetic. The persisting associations and aestheticism associated with the Byronic show how effective Byron's attentions

were. Imagine Byron sitting for a portrait, extremely conscious of its importance, and thus, conscious of himself. Manning and Wolfson write, "The American William Edward West, who painted Byron in Italy in 1822, noted… 'I found him a bad sitter. He talked all the time…When he was silent….he assumed a countenance that did not belong to him, as though he were thinking of a frontispiece for Childe Harold,' as though…he were imitating one of his own portraits" (ix). The information loop is present here, as Byron sits for a portrait, imagining a past portrait and being inspired by the critiques he had heard referencing the previous portrait. The past, present, and future images of Byron are as blended and obscured as his boundaries between the imagined and the real. Byron, it seems, was a man born to deconstruct categories. He defies a static interpretation. There are so many factors and conditions to considering Byron and the Byronic, it is like the poet's inexhaustible energy had even seeped into his image to the point that the public is forced to look at him from multiple, moving, shifting angles.

With his widespread public image and recognizable, constructed aesthetic came hoards of imitators. "The Byronic 'look' was mimicked everywhere by people who 'practiced at the glass, in the hope of catching the curl of the upper lip, and scowl of the brow'" of Byron (Wilson, 5). Imagining a public so rapt with Byron's image that it wanted to reproduce that image is a crucial element to his power as a celebrity, and his continued longevity. The idea of there being a Byronic type, a look, and an aesthetic is present not only in much of the literature that followed Byron, but in the public at large. Wilson reminds us that Byron's work inspired a "vast array of literary parodics and continuations" (5). These parodies spawned were "associated with the gloomy egotism of vampires and not with the quick-fire wit of Byron's writing" (9). This disjuncture between what Byron had constructed and what the public constructed in his image illuminates that perhaps the public were picking and choosing exactly what they wanted Byron to

10

mean to them at that cultural moment, not the classically trained master and manipulator of

ottava rima, but rather something else. Byron, himself, "didn't want to be seen as a sedentary

poet with writer's block, but rather as a man of action who wrote as fast as he lived and with as

much nonchalance" (Wilson, 8). His efforts did succeed in at least "making Wordsworth,

Coleridge and Keats seem bothered bourgeois in contrast with his own effortless ease and class"

(8). Byron was such a phenomenon that he sparked an entire aesthetic, a global and "effortless"

image of the writer. Byron's myth transcended his human self and became a cultural expression.

Coincidentally, this transcendence both fortified and destroyed Byron, the man. Byron,

and the Byronic, became a commodity. Byron could now be bought for a modest fee. This

commodification was not exclusive to Byron, of course, since so much of the Romantic

movement is centered around showing resistance to an overly industrialized world, to the

grittiness of the city, of the removal of the subject. Romanticism discusses this trend toward

commodification by "repeatedly us[ing] metaphors of parasitic consumption and alienation to

describe their perceived loss of cultural and interpretive authority" (McDayter, 44). The most

glaring and obvious connection to this tendency would be found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*;

or, The Modern Prometheus, where the creation is described as unnatural and monstrous.

Byron's creations had already taken on lives of their own once they were released into the public

sphere. McDayter writes, "he only saw the evidence of his professional degradation brought

about by industrialization and the commodification of his poetic image" and this quote reveals

what perpetuated Byron's fame, the commodification of his poetry and his image, is also what

would lead to personal degradation (45). Byron, as the first literary celebrity, was put into the

position of being one of the first poets to experience this commodification—Byron was

something that could be purchased at one's local bookseller's, whether it be in poetry or portraits of pre-assembled commonplace books.

Of course, Byron was attractive because he was, in some ways, dangerous. Kenyon Jones reports that "looking at Byron, as a man, soon became almost as important (and supposedly as dangerous to young girls) as reading his poetry" (109). This statement both clarifies that Byron's premeditated portraits were massively important to his public image, and that Byron's face, the representation of his body, held as much of the public's attention as his writing did. The fact that even looking at Byron could be considered morally injurious is a victory for Byron, in that his reputation was of enough consequence that parents would want to shield their children from his influence. In "Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation," Goldsmith writes, "in threatening the moral community, Byron became a flashpoint for controversies of national identity" (31). Due to Byron's status as a member of the English peerage, and a widely read poet of the English nation, Byron's actions reflected on England as a whole. Goldsmith continues, "Byron does not import a debilitating foreign immorality but rather reveals the true essence of the English character, as any true Englishman, would of course, recognize" (32). Of course, if Byron were indeed so seductive, so hypnotic as to enthrall a nation and sway them to participate in his phenomenon, there must have been a reason to celebrate Byron as well as damn him. Byron's character is one of the nobility, he perpetuates a certain image as a celebrity that "in belonging to another class of person [he] is not subject to the same experiences as the common breed" (Wilson, 12). As a member of the peerage, Byron is instantly an expression of English behavior both at home and abroad.

So, Byron's moral transgressions and ambiguity were able to be forgiven, forgotten, or downright enjoyed by his fans. "Critics hostile to Byron began to translate his literary

12

seductiveness into material moral depravity," McDayter writes, and this material depravity was just another layer of danger added to Byron's reputation, and therefore one that made him more attractive to the public. Goldsmith continues by saying that Byron was a "star whose effect was distinctly transnational, [he] embodies the dialectal tensions through which nations come to understand themselves as such," hinting at Byron's fame as something much more culturally important (32). Byron did not only represent England as a poet, but rather as a member of the aristocracy, embodied Englishness and defined it as opposed to say, Frenchness or Greek character. England was able to see itself in Lord Byron, and "as the nation only exists in the context of other nations," define itself (Goldsmith, 32). Biographer Andre Maurois wrote, "Byron's poetry was of a restless age….Millions of men had experienced, as Byron did, the feeling of the unjustness and madness of the universe. For them as for himself, his poems were 'the volcano, the eruption of which prevents an earthquake'" (viii). Byron's poetry was not only topical but rang true to the ears of readers shaken by war and tumultuous changes.

Byron was always a traveler, yet, after the infamous separation of 1816 in which Lord and Lady Byron were parted ways, Byron "exiled himself under a cloud of scandal" (McDayter,52). This event in Byron's life would be a "crucial episode in the shaping of Byron's celebrity", in that their feud would become a public one, where the press watched volleys being traded back and forth between the two, and were eager to see the drama play out (Eisner, 24). Byron had married Annabelle Milbanke in 1815, having proposed to her twice and finally received an acceptance from her. By the next year in January of 1816, Lady Byron had left their home in Piccadilly Terrace to stay with her parents, taking their daughter Augusta Ada with her. Byron stayed in England as Annabella and her family "formally begun separation proceedings" that February. "As news of the separation spread, so too did rumors about what lay behind it:

13

Byron's supposed insanity, his drinking, and darkly hinted, incest [with half sister Augusta], sodomy, cruelty, even a murder in his past" (Eisner, 25).

The separation had Byron's audiences involved in the drama of his day-to-day life. Byron wrote the infamous "Fare Thee Well!" to Annabella, and it, along with Byron's "A Sketch" was printed that April in *The Champion.* "Lady Byron early on recognized the separation proceedings as a battle for public opinion, and both anxiously tracked and sought to manipulate public sentiment," reports Eisner (25). Lady Byron published her "Declaration" in the newspaper as a response to Byron's poems. Augusta and Byron were "cut in fashionable society" (26). Maurois wrote of the couple:

> Lord Byron and Lady Byron have often been confronted by writers as if it were
> necessary that in an unhappy marriage one party should be deemed guilty. Lord
> and Lady Byron both had irritating faults, and both had great virtues. They were
> not made for a life in common, but…in the end they did justice to each other more
> lucidly and calmly than did certain of their posthumous champions. (vii-iii).

After the Deed of Separation was prepared on April 21st of that year, Byron left for the continent. Wilson writes after the "breakdown of his marriage, Byron moved from the center of society to its margins" and that it was "in exile that his strongest poetry was produced" (4). Overseas, Byron wrote *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *Manfred*, as well as a fourth canto for *Childe Harold*, then *Beppo* and began *Don Juan.* Byron began the process of once again "blending…private and public, of mystification and revelation…[which is] part of the method and myth of *Don Juan*" (Graham, 33). Manning and Wolfson remark, "Everyone read *Don Juan* with electric curiosity. It was dazzlingly, shockingly new" (ix). This description fits Byron

wondrously well as the poet was famous for his restlessness; Holland writes, " his great enemy in life was boredom; and his great object the discovery and experience of excitements… His poetry can therefore fittingly be interpreted as both the record and the expression of craving for fresh sensations" (154). Byron's restless spirit transcended life into literature, spreading through his readership like a blaze, filling his readers' imaginations with the excitement they craved.

## II.	Byron's and the Public: Byromania!

"Byromania" is the term Annabella Milbanke gave to the rampant fanaticism aimed at Byron and his work. The literary success that *Childe Harold* received was, of course, not isolated. With the 1814 publication of *The Corsair* "10, 000 copies…[were] sold on the day of its publication" and by 1815 *Childe Harold* was being printed in its tenth edition (Wilson, 4). Manning and Wolfson explain, "this sensationally successful phase of Byron's career epitomizes the paradoxical convergence of Murray's exploitation of the resources of advertising, publishing and distribution to foster best-sellerdom and star status, with a noble who gave away his copyrights because aristocrats did not write for money" (xv). Byron was not only the exact mix of fact and fiction, of excitement and of ancient English aristocracy, he was also writing at the most opportune point in time to achieve his incredible star status. Byron practically sold himself, Murray could rest assured that Byron was an incredible acquisition. Byron's celebrity status completely changed what being a public personality meant, and the manner in which he interacted with the public that supported him was as novel as his success.

Murray was a strategist. "Even before the poem [*Child Harold*] was officially offered to the public, advance copies stirred excitement about the dashing young noble freshly returned from his exotic travels," writes Eisner (20). Creating hype around such a person, so primed with possibility, was a tactical maneuver to make the road to success even smoother. Byron's success even lead to the fact that is read because "appeals to the unconscious and to the pleasures of fantasy life before he is read for literary merit," much like Wilson's previous assertions about Byronic heroes and their relationship to literature (9). As discussed above, Byron's success lead to a disconnect between his own identity and his image. He was identified with Harold and with

Juan, though, Wilson says "Byron tried hard to control the image of himself being produced, but he also identified with it" (6). In this fantastic, exotic reflection that was somewhat ameliorated, somewhat demonized, Byron could push himself into his literature, and pull his literature into himself. Thorsleu writes that "Byron did not project life into literature nearly so much as he projected literature into life."

Often referred to as a literary "lion," the term "lionism" is actually "the quintessential mode of nineteenth-century celebrity, a cultural practice which is virtually coterminous with the century itself" (Salmon, 60). The trend of lionism refers to the "figure of the fashionable, dandified author, whose reputation in high society mimics the celebrity of Byron and Scott…but reduces their status to a parodic formula" (Salmon, 63). Byron himself "refers to literary 'lions' as being writers of ephemeral reputation…but their significance lies in their self-conscious effort to define this new cultural persona" (61). It seems that this term struggles to define itself because the now-familiar clockwork of celebrity did not always exist, and was, indeed, just emerging. The startling success of Byron, and indeed, of other writers that achieved success during the period, spawned this phenomenon of "lionism." This phenomenon was "emerging out of a culture of visual spectacle and sociable encounter… lionism yet feeds off the subsequent expansion of the field of print culture in ways that anticipate… twentieth and twenty-first-century forms of mass media publicity" (Salmon, 60). Today, literary giants have shelves and displays assigned to them at their local bookseller's, they have commercials, advertisements, reviews in magazines and newspapers—modern literary celebrities also have the power of their names and reputations, and these names sell books, much as Byron's did.

Byron seemed to be the standard by which lions held themselves to, and never met. Byron's name, as a signifier for a whole set of cultural associations, began to mean "both solitary

elegance and gross libertinism, physical indulgence and emaciation; the sharp dandy as well as the disheveled wanderer" (Wilson, 9). This is hardly surprising, as we know by this point that Byron was not only a man who was born to obscure and obstruct boundary making and categorization, he was also the embodiment of contrasting characteristics. Byron's body was a body that was at war with itself, both in reference to his literary body and his physical one. Byron and the Byronic hero came to signify what was authentic and natural, but also what was artificial and constructed. He was a radical, a libertine, an outsider—and at the same time he was as English as could be. A model of elegance and composure, Byron and the Byronic were also associated with the moody vagabond. He was at once beautiful and disfigured, possessing at once a sensual gaze and a club foot. He was the flawed hero, the exploiter of the masses with his sensationalist topics, and at the same time, a literary master that composed thousands of lines in flawless *ottava rima*. Byron was at once a calculating mastermind and a subject of terrible scandal. He was everything a consuming public could ask for from its object of fixation.

Byromaniacs were sure to see how Byron was an in-between figure, taking on so much significance simply because of his multi-faceted nature. While he carefully refuted connections to his characters, the public ignored those refutations, looking for Byron, the man, in every word. Byron was both authentic and artificial, a master of artifice and image, and at the same time, expressing himself and finding himself in his work. Byron's career helps to "elucidate not simply the birth of a celebrity, and with it, popular culture as we know it, but also a dramatic shift in the relations of production developing between authors, their works and the reading public— [Byron's career was] a cultural event which marked the industrialization of Romanticism" (McDayter, 44). Studying Byron allows us to study the minute changes in the scaffolding that

holds the machine of celebrity in place—success, lionism, celebrity—all of these changes

hearkening to that aforementioned subtle evolution.

Any poet that would don an exotic "Oriental" costume, or drink wine from a skull at parties,

is a poet engaging with his interested public and keeping them interested (McDayter, 48). And

society wanted to look, wanted to engage with Byron. "The violent energy of past political

dissidence seemed to be reformulating itself into the hysteria of fandom," writes McDayter, and

while that sounds suspiciously like politics and war had wound up the public so much that, like

an angry spring, they would discharge their coiled up energy in any direction they could--it also

presents the public of Byron's day as being as ready for Byron as he was for them (49). Byron,

his publishers, and his public were all separate parts of a machine waiting to be assembled by the

Romantic period in which such fame was now possible. Eisner writes on the times of Byron and

directly following:

> This phenomenon itself is the product of a literary and market system
>
> involving many individuals, not just the poet himself…. But post-Byron, writers
>
> must come to grips with a literary field in which celebrity matters in new ways.
>
> On the one hand, reader-writer relationships are sensationalized and more
>
> powerfully and perhaps more dangerously eroticized, and Byron makes clear what
>
> kind of popularity it is possible for a poet to achieve. On the other hand, the
>
> phenomenon of Byron makes evident the commercialization not only of poetry
>
> but also of poetic identity itself (47).

These thoughts on the world after Byron are justified, in that, Byron's celebrity status changed

everything. He changed what it meant to be an author, to be a producer, to have a public image,

to have a fanbase and interact with them, and to manipulate the media and the public into participating in his phenomenon. Byron's actions make him a subject of scrutiny and gaze, yes, but he is the one commanding where the public is looking.

Byron and his fandom anticipated the contemporary moment in such a way that it becomes amusingly easy to imagine Byron in our present day. You can see, in your mind's eye, the fashionable poet walking the red carpet to the film adaptation of *Don Juan*, fans screaming for autographs or just at the sight of him walking by. If he and Annabella had separated in our present day, their faces would be on every gossip site and tabloid cover, with the press scrabbling to know what will happen to poor Ada. The poet's status as the first celebrity meant that he was a pioneer, braving previously uncharted waters. Byron's tact and charisma supported him through the construction of his image, and that construction served him throughout his life. Byron fits into our celebrity machine so well because he was the first to be sent through it—Byron would be able to integrate into modern celebrity culture because he is so familiar with its inner workings. And he knew how to manipulate that machine to his desired effect.

III.   Nineteenth Century Byronic Fandom and Modern Fandom Practices

In his book *Life: the Movie,* Neal Gabler reveals what celebrity culture is today by writing:

> Not only are celebrities the protagonists of our news, the subjects of our daily
> discourse and the repositories of our values, but they have also embedded
> themselves so deeply in our consciousness that many individuals profess feeling
> closer to, and more passionate about, them than about their own primary
> relationships: Witness the torrents of grief unleashed by the sudden death of
> Princess Diana in 1997, or the mourners who told television interviewers that her
> funeral was the saddest day of their lives (7).

Learning Byron's history offers context for this phenomenon. Normally, such a disruptive

cultural phenomenon would be too ancient to trace. How could such a thing begin? Celebrity has

invaded every facet of modern life, indeed, as Gabler reminds, sometimes filling in for our most

precious relationships. Yet, with the birth of Byron-the-poet, it all becomes clear. Byron filled a

vacancy in society, filled the grasping hands of the public with his poetry, yes, but more

importantly, with his persona. Gabler speaks of Byron by saying he was "canny enough to

cultivate a Bohemian persona as the Romantic poet and then actively exploit it" (124). Gabler's

language is pointed enough to assure that Byron's manipulation was no accident, and our careful

study of Byron constructing his image from his waistcoat to his portraits is evidence enough of

that tactful construction. Like the precise language of his tightly knit stanzas, Byron wrote the

book on how he was to be perceived.

Byron's public, like today's fan culture, were "dismissed as 'brainless consumers,'" that read Byron simply to participate in his phenomenon (Throsby, 227). Today's consumers of fan culture are labeled in a similar manner. Henry Jenkins, a fan culture scholar, applies the theories of De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* to fan studies. Jenkins, in his book entitled *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture,* explores what it means to be a consumer, and how consuming media works. De Certeau and Jenkins argue that reading, or consuming media, is far from a passive activity. Throsby, having mentioned Jenkins in her article on "Byron, Commonplacing and Early Fan Culture," found that due to Jenkins' theories, "fans have started to be defined by their productive rather than their consumptive capabilities" (227). Consuming media is quite an active and productive process, wherein the fan is creating meaning from the text being observed and creating a new context for that text. Throsby explores the very literal products that Byron's fans created, namely, their commonplace books in which they proved themselves to be "not just interested in Byron's 'celebrity' image, but were critical and discerning lovers of literature, who had an active rather than passive relationship to his poetry" (229).

Commonplacing was apparently a practice that had a resurgence of popularity during the Romantic period, and "Byron features in the books more than any other author" (228). This alone is another marker of his cultural pervasion and the heartfelt response many readers had toward him. "Gibbon, Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Byron himself…kept commonplace books to record notable quotes and poems," and so Byron's presence in so many of these books is a record of how many people considered Byron's language to be "notable" and worthy of inclusion (229). Byron's fans were also participating in other modes of production, for example,

writing him fan letters and sending "poems written in the style of Byron, as well as alternative cantos and endings to Byron's own works, some of which were published." Fandom, then, had definitely taken on an active, productive processes for appreciating Byron and his works. Throsby remarks, "Byron was also, more than any other author of his time, the focus of countless attempts at what would now be called 'fan fiction'; that is, imaginative stories written by amateur writers about Byron and his works" (228). Fans were not only constructing fictions about Byron's work, but also Byron the man.

The nineteenth century followers of Byron sound more and more like the active fan consumers of today. Fans today write the same fictions, make the same sort of scrapbooks (although these books now look more like blogs) and write fanmail. Modern fandom appears to have deep roots, tracing back to the Romantic period. The implementation of these practices by so many fans appears to have spurred real cultural change that has lasted to the present. Interestingly enough, Byron himself was a fan—notoriously fascinated with the personality of Napoleon, he even styled his name to "Noel Byron" so that he could write his initials as "NB" in some sort of homage, or joke to himself. Eisner writes, "writers in this culture are often fans too, of course, and so know the experience from the inside," and that "Byron was obsessed not only with world-famous figures like Napoleon, but also with figures of more local renown—boxers, theatre personalities, the fashionable and the eccentric" (5). Eisner's accounts allows for a more complete view of Byron, the man. The poet was not only approaching his explosive celebrity from the perspective of the persona, but knew what it was like to be a fan all on his own.

Writers experiencing incredibly literary fame today would include the ilk of up-and-coming young adult author John Green and established science-fiction legend Neil Gaiman. While these writers have not permeated their culture to the extent of Byron, they interact with their public so often it is difficult not to make study of them. The Internet has opened the way to so many possible fandom uses it is almost dizzying. Both authors communicate to their audience via Tumblr blog, via Twitter news snippets, via Youtube videos and Facebook postings. The resulting bond between author and readership is strengthened by this type of interaction, as a very Byronic process begins to take place. The author and the work are no longer separate entities, but rather are blended into a singular personality with which the fan can interact. On platforms like Twitter, authors can speak to the multitudes with one message, or reply to fans directly so that their replies can be seen by all the other fans, or even send private messages. These levels of interaction offer the author choices on how exactly they would like to communicate to their audience, who will see the information (although, in the digital age, no information stays private) and what is being communicated in exactly which words. Authors like Green and Gaiman can control what information is reaching their public so efficiently and effortlessly it is hard to believe that Byron himself would not be jealous.

Authors can engage in discussion with their readership, can promote their products, can choose to provide content that is edifying or entertaining or a mixture of the two to their devoted fanbase. Writers like the *Harry Potter* series' J.K. Rowling have chosen not to interact with their fans in this similar manner. Rowling, does, however, still have a website that she uses to notify her readership of important or newsworthy events in her career. Rowling's control over her personal information and interaction with her fans is showing the applications of Internet usage

on a scale. Writers can choose to be incredibly immersed in their public, like Green and Gaiman,

or choose to be more private, like Rowling. Each, however, in the style of Byron, is constructing

their public image with their choices. The personality of famous writers becomes as important as

their works in the eyes of the public. Fans, too, can take active roles in how often they try to

communicate with their favorite celebrities, and in which manner they choose to try. Fans can

easily search for their chosen celebrities on any social media or blogging website and find

multiple ways to initiate contact. Through blog, email, video comment, video response, social

media—the choices are endless and ever-expanding.

Literary celebrity and fan culture are tied tightly to one another, since they are symbiotic

and need one another to survive. As ever, literary celebrity is developing, and in Gabler's

chronology, the publishing industry became more and more interested in finding promising

personalities to cash-in on. The publishing industry found "actors and actresses, singers,

comedians, war heroes, anchormen and protagonists of scandals [and] signed huge publishing

contracts [with them] clearly not because anyone expected them to produce great books but

because they carried ready-made entertainment value" (127). This experiment did not always

pay off for the publishing industry, as many personalities simply could not deliver material, or

garner enough attention to make their efforts successful and worthy of repetition. After all, these

people, by definition, are not writers by trade. Gabler followed this trend as it developed and

discovered the next step for publishing was simply to publish books of celebrity photographs.

Byron's valuable portraiture endeavor of the nineteenth-century resurfaces in the twenty-first-

century as commodity in its most basic form—with no literary value attached.

As with Green and Gaiman, we've seen that the future of literary celebrity, and indeed, of literature, is not as bleak as all that. While sensationalist literature exists and thrives, it is hardly exclusive to the contemporary period. If the publishing industry has concocted a new gimmick to sell books, only its efficacy for achieving the intended end will decide whether or not it has cultural value. The real interaction between authors and their reading public takes place in person, at book signings and events of that kind, and online where the barrier between author and fan is at its thinnest. Like the barrier between fan and celebrity on the red carpet, online there is a possibility for conversation, and a platform for both sides to be heard. The celebrity is viewing and viewed, and the public gazes with permission.

The parallels between the nineteenth-century audience and the contemporary reading public do not stop there. Eisner writes, "a memoir-mad public devoured the gossip about writers' private lives retailed not just in autobiographies and reminiscences but in reviews, *romans-a-clef*, and newspaper notices, and some adoring readers schemed to see in person, to get to know, even to sleep with the poets they idolized" (1). This type of hysterical fanaticism parallels modern fan crazes, though the intensity seen here inspired by Byron may be hard to come by for the usual literary personality—this kind of fanaticism is now usually reserved for movie stars and musicians. Amusingly enough, Wilson writes about what Byronism has manifested itself today by stating, "Byromania in America could just as easily be applied to the impact on their public of James Dean or Mick Jagger, the Byronic heroes of the 1950's and 60's." Byromania appears to have anticipated every facet of celebrity that we experience today. There is even an argument that stardom is not achieved for actors until "off-screen lifestyles and personalities equal acting

ability in importance" (10).

Fan fiction is another fan practice spanning from the nineteenth century to the present day. Jenkins writes an in-depth analysis of what exactly is taking place when fans engage with media, be it visual or written text:

> The fans' particular viewing stance-- at once ironically distant, playfully close-- sparks a recognition that the [text] is open to intervention and active appropriation. The ongoing process of fan rereading results in a progressive elaboration of the [text] "universe" through inferences and speculations that push well beyond its explicit information, the fans' meta-text, whether perpetuated through gossip or embodied within written criticism, already constitutes a form of rewriting (155).

Fans who participated in this practice and centered their works around Byron in the nineteenth century were engaging not only in fantasy fulfillment, but also of an active reinterpretation of the character and phenomenon that was the Byronic. This practice was not only centered around Byron, the man, but also the poems and plays he produced. Fans reinterpreted the texts through their creative rearranging of the texts, or wrote new stories with completely different outcomes. There was even some speculation that this fan production and imitation was "obscuring the figure of the poet himself" (Wilson, 7). Fan produced writings included fan fictions of all types, but also fan letters. Eisner directs us to "think of Caroline Lamb reading *Childe Harold*… and writing fan mail to its author, leading to their disastrous and very public affair" (4). In this instance, fan production has crossed the boundary into a reimagining or appreciation of the

27

original text and has become the impetus for an actual relationship. It is hard to imagine the same sort of interaction occurring between author and fan today, as authors are very wary of their reading public and generally keep their distance. Even keeping close ties using the Internet is restricted by the barrier of technology, which in this instance, is a very helpful barrier that keeps unwanted entanglements at bay.

Eisner also narrates a few curious and rather amusing instances of fan interaction with Byron and other poets:

> When Byron stops in Dover on his way out of the country in the wake of the separation scandal of 1816, Lady Byron is told by her confidant Dr. Lushington, "the curiosity to see him was so great that many ladies accoutered themselves as chambermaids for the purpose of obtaining under that disguise a nearer inspection whilst he continued at the inn. Such voracious pursuit of writers may have begun with eighteenth-century celebrities, but in the nineteenth-century these forms of fandom had become virtually institutionalized: by the Victorian era, Wordsworth found curious tourists regularly making off with his shrubbery, and even dead poets weren't immune—mediums kept the ghost of Shelley busy (4).

While these accounts are undeniably entertaining, it is troubling that fans would stoop to deceit, thievery, and reaching out to mediums to be able to participate more directly with the objects of their respect and fixation. What is even more disturbing is that we see this sort of fan hysteria every day reported in the media. Even John Lennon was murdered by a man that identified as a "fan." These examples show that while fan culture is a major productive force, and most of that

time that force is used for good, there are examples dating back to Byron's time of destructive acts committed in the name of fandom. The fandom as a tangible body, or as many tangible bodies, is quite threatening when thought of in the ratio of one writer per however many thousand fans may be interested in that personality. In the nineteenth century, "because Byron's readers formed such a massive group that they have been seen less as discerning readers and more as rapacious consumers" and "in these sorts of descriptions the Byronic multitude lose their identity as readers, becoming faceless fanatics who have no connection to Byron's actual poetry," writes Throsby, and that can be a terrifying prospect (228). However, these same fans are the ones that sent loving fan letters, wrote entertaining fan fictions and poems in Byron's own style. Therefore, the reading public and the fandom are as random as any group of people can be, their actions as unpredictable as any mob.

In Byron's time, "the mechanisms of celebrity fascinate[d]… writers not only because they [had] ambitions for fame, but also because they recognize[d] both mass-mediated charisma and mass-mediated fandom [were] new, powerful, and mysterious phenomena" (Eisner, 5-6). Byron's experience and insight on fan culture and celebrity were not at all what modern writers experience and observe today. Modern writers that are successful expect media exposure, expect fan interaction and expect to be judged on every perceivable level. They even expect fan fictions, fan letters and fan encounters to be part of their daily lives. Modern writers also have the added bonus of communicating with their fans via technology, a powerful tool that allows for information to flow between parties. There is so much of an exchange of information lately that even more writers are being accused of pandering, as Byron was accused, to public taste and

offering up "fan service" as their product.

Fan service is an interesting dilemma to examine. The walls between author and fan have become so degraded that there really aren't any walls at all. In the case of media pandering to its audience, the fans not only are reimagining, reconstructing and reorganizing the canon to their imaginations, they are writing the canon with their desires. Where Byron swore not to succumb to any appetites, other writers certainly did not uphold the same oath or convictions. The choice, as always, remains with the writers. These exchanges weaken the barriers and age-old traditions of publishing and writing, and allow for the passer-by to see inside the machine as it clicks its gears.

While Byron and the Byronic may have metamorphosed over the time of Byron's life, his death and into contemporary times, the efforts of the poet have shaped those terms to have certain connotations. Byron's early death at the age of 36 left his fans shocked and mourning. He died slowly and painfully in bed, having been bled out by doctors in hopes of curing his illness. Graham remarks that Byron's memory currently honored by thinking of him as "a freedom fighter whose myth inspires the world to this day" (42). Throsby asserts that "reading Byron not only created an illusion of connection between the reader and the author, but generated a collective intimacy that belied the mechanisms of mass consumption" and these modern remembrances of Byron's impact are written with the hindsight of 188 years distance. But after Byron's own time, in the new Victorian period, the increasingly morality-conscious public began to resent him. After Byron's death, Wilson remarks, "Byron's posthumous renown in England increasingly turned into a feverish anti-Byronism which had less to do with his poetry than his

pose, although the two were seen as indistinguishable" (1). Byron was killed not only anticlimactically in Greece, away from England and all that he had built, but the public also began to turn their backs on him, so soon after his death.

The legacy of Byron is immense. Entrusted with the title of first literary celebrity, Byron's shaping of the practices of fame span to the contemporary expressions of celebrity and fan culture. All the fan practices of Byron's day are present today, if not in slightly modified forms. Writers, taking cues from a legacy that has Byron as its origin, have learned what is expected of them as celebrities. They know how to manipulate their images in the media, to construct the personalities they want to construct and to spread the information they want to spread. Naturally, there is always scandal, a topic with which Byron was intimately familiar. Byron and Annabella's drawn out feud in the media was an extremely important case study in media manipulation and how to garner public favor, the lessons learned from that study have been circulating throughout time to the present day. Gabler makes the case that celebrity has become so engrained in our culture that we no longer are content to simply observe celebrities, we all want to participate and be the stars of our own life movies. While this cannot be true for every person, Byron certainly lived out the fiction of his own making, his personal drama that he shared with the world. Byron certainly seemed to recognize his celebrity for what it was—as it came to be that out of Juan's mouth, Byron penned, "But ne'ertheless I hope it is no crime/ To laugh at *all* things — for I wish to know/ *What*, after *all*, are *all* things — but a *show*?"(Canto VII, stanza 2).

Works Cited

Byron, George Gordon Byron, Susan J. Wolfson, and Peter J. Manning. Introduction.*Selected Poems*. London: Penguin, 2005. N. pag. Print.

Byron, George Gordon Byron, T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan, Willis Winslow Pratt, Susan J. Wolfson, and Peter J. Manning. Introduction. *Don Juan*. London: Penguin, 2004. N. pag. Print.

Certeau, Michel De. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984. Print.

Eisner, Eric. *Nineteenth-century Poetry and Literary Celebrity*. Basingstoke [England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.

Gabler, Neal. *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. New York: Knopf, 1998. Print.

Goldsmith, Jason. "Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation." *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 31-32. Print.

Graham, Peter. "His Grand Show: Byron and the Myth of Mythmaking." *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Culture*. New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1999. 24-42. Print.

Holland, Tom. "Undead Byron." *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Culture*. New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1999. 154-56. Print.

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Kenyon Jones, Christine. "Fantasy and Transfiguration: Byron and his Portraits." *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Culture*. New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1999. 109-132. Print.

Maurois, Andre 1885-1967., and Hamish 1894-1937, Tr. Miles. *Byron [Maurois]*. New York, D. Appleton and Company: n.p., 1930. Print.

McDayter,Ghislaine. "Conjuring Byron: Byromania, Literary Commofification and the Birth of Celebrity." *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Culture*. New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1999. 43-58. Print.

Otis, Laura. *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

Salmon, Richard. "The Physiognomy of the Lion." *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 60-63. Print.

Throsby, Corin. "Byron, Commonplacing and Early Fan Culture." *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 227-41. Print.

Wilson, Frances. "Introduction: Byron, Byronism and Byromaniacs." Introduction.*Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Culture*. New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1999. 1-21. Print.