Byron’s Politics: a black sheep in the Whig society
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When Byron’s politics is examined, his aristocracy comes to be a strong obstacle to his politics on the side of the people. Was Byron really an aristocrat? Caroline Lamb severely describes his aristocracy in *Glenarvon*.

“The young man you call Lord Glenarvon, has no claim to that title; his grandfather was a traitor; his father was a miserable exile, who was obliged to enter the Nave by way of gaining a livelihood; his mother was a woman of very doubtful character . . .” ¹

Caroline’s grandfather, Lord Spencer, inherited his father’s estate worth £750,000 and had an income of £700 a week.² On the other hand Byron’s mother wrote that she had to live upon £150 a year.³ Byron’s aristocracy was just in name and he was even called blackguard behind him at Harrow. ‘I neither can nor will bear. . . he abused me in a most violent manner, called me blackguard . . ..’ (BLJ I, 41–42) ⁴ The word, blackguard, when applied to an individual rather than a group, it approximated its modern meaning, “one of the idle criminal class: a low worthless character addicted to or ready for crime; . . .” ⁵

This was how others regarded Byron. So at the speech contest of Harrow, Byron’s deep concern was his appearance. “I have as much [spending?] money, as many Clothes, and in every respect of appearance am equal if not superior to most of my schoolfellows”. (BLJ I, 49) Byron was very proud of his aristocracy but he was an oppressed in reality because of his physical handicap, eccentric mother and poor life. Eventually he became very sensitive and sympathetic to the poor and the oppressed. His first political achievement, *Fame Work Bill Speech* is full of strong sympathy for the poor.

You call these men a mob, desperate, dangerous & ignorant, . . —Are we aware of our obligations to a Mob? —It is the Mob, that labour in your fields & serve in your houses, that man your navy & recruit your army, —suppose this man surrounded by those children for whom he is unable to procure bread at the hazard of his existence, about to be torn forever from a family. Will you erect a gibbet in every field & hang up men like

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¹ Caroline Lamb, *Glenarvon* (London: Henry Colburn, 1816) 292
Neither Lord Holland nor Lady Caroline’s husband had any sympathy with Nottingham frame-breakers. Then Byron’s sympathy to the breakers turned into the fury to the government and its nobles.

Those villains, the Weavers, are all grown refractory,
Asking some succour for Charity’s sake—

So hang them in clusters round each Manufactory,
That will at once put an end to Mistake

The rascals, perhaps, may betake them to robbing,
The dogs to be sure have got nothing to eat—
So if we can hang them for breaking a bobbin
‘Twill save all the governments’ money and meat:

Men are more easily made than machinery—
Stockings fetch better prices than lives—
Gibbets on Sherwood will heightened the scenery,
Showing how Commerce, how Liberty thrives!

(An Ode to The framers of The Frame Bill)

Strong irony and disgust reveal in “put an end to Mistake”. He wrote Mistake with capital M, and in Italics. It is not their mistake but the government’s mistake! The starving dogs can eat the meat of hanged men. The rascals take clothes, shoes, shirts from the dead bodies. Byron expresses the dreadful and desperate scene together with his deep fury. By using these disgusting words “villains”, “rascals,” “dogs”, and “wretches” he emphasized the utter discrimination, humiliation, assault, degrading and inhumane treatment of the government. Byron’s outbursts in his writings are not at all literary art or exaggeration. Never is the “class hatred.”

In those days a large proportion of the population subsisted on the poverty line and many families found themselves on the edge of starvation. But an economist, Thomas Malthus even wanted to abolish the Poor Law.

He believed that mankind was basically selfish and motivated primarily by the sexual

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8 Malcom Kelsall, Byron’s Politics (Sussex: The Harvest Press, 1987) 48-49 All these words would be called “class hatred” suggests Kelsall according to E.P. Thompson.
inequality in the existing order of property was “natural” . . . “the cause of poverty” . . . “had little or no direct relation to forms of government or the unequal division of property” and therefore the poor had no “claims of right on society for subsistence.”

His influence was great and established the basis of the nineteenth-century doctrine of “self-help”

. . . it was the responsibility of every individual to look after his or her own welfare. Support, when it was given should be minimal and aimed at greeting the people concerned back on their feet so that they would become self-supporting as soon as possible.

“Did you ever read “Malthus on Population?” If he be right, war and pestilence are our best friends, to save us from being eaten alive. . .” (BLJII, 98) “Malthus tells us that were it not for Battle, Murder and sudden death, we should be overstocked, I think we have latterly had a redundance of these national benefits, . . . (BLJII, 74)

At that time people were also suffered by the war. They were on the edge of starvation. “How many thousands of times was that cry repeated—‘Give us work at any price: half a loaf is better than no bread!’”

. . . for the enjoying class it was a way of seeing life and making entry into best society. . . They were cadets of the great families who led ...politics at home; others were of the wealthy bourgeoisie who could afford to buy their commissions and to mingle with the scions of the nobility.

Then the York affair came to the world. The King’s second son and Commander-in-Chief of the army, the Duke of York, had bribery and corruption.

The prices for the intervention ranged from £2600 for a majority to £400 for an ensigncy. . . Officers commissions were available only to men of gentle birth. . . When George Wyndham wanted to avoid going to the West Indies in 1811, his father, Lord Egremont, simply bought him a majority . . . ‘. . . £1100 in the hands of the Agents’.

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12 Nicolson 286
13 Murray 155
14 Ibid. 155
15 Ibid. 273
The soldiers of poor and humble origins had no escape from death.

The groan, the roll in dust, the all-white eye
Turned back within its socket - these reward
Your rank and file by thousands, . . . *Don Juan, VIII, 13*  

In those days political parties are no more, Whig and Tory ceased to be distinction and nobody cares about the poor. For Melbourn, politics was only an extension of a particular notion of social living. Lord Grey sometimes seemed to regard political life as “amusement or pastime for grown up gentlemen.” “His interest in politics was spasmodic and he spent much of his time on his estates.” Lord Spencer complained that politics were becoming “a sad drawback on the comfortable enjoyment of Society”. The generation gap was becoming much wider between the young and the old Whigs after the York affair. The young Whigs, Althorp, Milton, Tavistock, Ebrington, and Lyttelton were aristocratic, morally earnest, deeply puritanical.

Tavistock admonished his brother, “When you say there is no distress, you are wrong. It is dreadful amongst the working classes of the community. Whilst we have excess of wealth and money on one side, we have the extremes of poverty and crime on the other, individual riches and national misery.”

Hazlitt was uncompromising in his opinions of Byron. Although he was impressed by the poet’s bold criticism of politics, he found his work willfully perverse, superficial and vain. Hazlitt could not forgive Byron for being a noble man not for sing his social status for self-promotion.

Byron was in Holland House, where the Whig members were all the opposite of the young Whigs. Holland House was just the gathering place for artists, illuminati, politicos, grandees, foreign ambassadors, French and Italian refugees. Byron has no power and chance to realize his politics. Just the days party after party.

Went out—come home—this, that, and the other—and “all is vanity, . . .” . . . Talking of

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20 Wasson 51
21 Ibid. 52
Vanity—(BLJ III 236)  Last night, party at Lansdowne—house. To—night, party at Lady Charlotte Grenville's—deplorable waste of time, and something of temper. Nothing imparted—nothing acquired—talking without ideas— . . . Heigho!—and in this way half London pass what is called life. To—morrow there is Lady Heathcote's—. . .” (BLJ III 254)

But Byron never ceases to consider politics. He jots down in his journals.

Oh for a Republic! . . . The greater the equality, the more impartially evil is distributed, and becomes lighter by the division among so many—therefore a Republic! (BLJ III, 244)

I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments; . . . The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery all over the earth, and one sort of establishment is no better, nor worse, for a people than another. (BLJ III, 242)

The poor have no means to survive. In February 1814, five children were condemned to death. One was only eight years old. The sentences were unbelievable: A girl, aged ten, was transported for seven years for one shawl and one petticoat; A boy, aged eleven, received the same sentence for stealing two silk handkerchiefs. 23 Byron denounces “The vices of the rich and great are called error, and those of the poor and lowly only, crimes.” 24

If his poems and sayings are used as propaganda today, they are dangerous enough for the existing social order even now.

It is still more difficult to say which form of Government is the worst—all are so bad. As for democracy, it is the worst of the whole: for what is (in fact) democracy? an Aristocracy of Blackguards. (BLJVIII, 107)

His self-exile seems due to his scandals. But the truth is that he has no comrades to share his politics and no possibility to realize it. “He was never entirely comfortable within the Whig party, nor the party with him.” 25 “Byron abandons the ineffectual games of Parliament in which men amuse themselves with pretensions of change.” 26

This year Roman Pope made an inauguration that he would help the weak and the poor. The strength of Byron’s politics exists in its insight toward the problems which are still unsolved even two hundred years later from his days.

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23 Murray 278
24 Marguerite Countess of Blessington, A Journal of the Conversation of Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington (London: Henry Colburn, 1834) 188
25 Ann Barton, Don Juan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 9