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Byron and the Maids of Athens

*Those events which materially influence our future destinies
often derive their origin from a trivial occurrence.*
Mary Shelley, from a draft of *Frankenstein*ⁱ

For all his love of Greece, the last thing Byron wanted was to find himself married to a maid of Athens. Yet that's precisely what has happened, in the popular imagination if not in actuality. As one manifestation of the remarkable persistence of the Byron Myth, for nearly two centuries readers have seized on the lyric "Maid of Athens, ere we part" and insisted on reading it into the rest of Byron's life. Even as Byron spent the last years of his life trying to find a way to "do some good," as he wrote to Douglas Kinnaird, and to become a statesman, as Roderick Beaton terms him in *Byron's War*, what audiences desired were romantic tales of maids of Athens and English lovers. "Maid of Athens ere we part" entered the imagination of readers and as David Roessel has put it, by the end of the nineteenth century audiences had been "conditioned to link the Maid of Athens and Byron's love of Greece" (79). His revolutionary and diplomatic political ambitions would forever be hamstrung by this romantic lyric.

Among Byron scholars, "Maid of Athens" is not considered a major work. Even that is an understatement: it's regarded as a bit of frivolity, occasional verse at best, an embarrassment in the corpus at worst. Few scholars have expended much energy on it, and most of that has been spent on the biographical backstory of Byron and the poem's dedicatee, Teresa Macri. Leslie Marchand declared that we must suspend our critical judgment if we're to enjoy it; in his words, "the 'Maid of Athens' is so well known and so bound up in the mingled emotions of romantic

Byronism, of Philhellenism, and sentimental love feelings that we are prone to accept it with the uncritical faith accorded to nursery rhymes. A critical eye, however, will detect its weaknesses as poetry”; it is marked by “sing-song rhythm, well-worn poetic diction, and forced imagery” (“Byron’s Hellenic Muse” 72; *Byron’s Poetry* 125). Nonetheless, *readers* have had great fondness for it. The scholar’s tiresome sing-song rhythm is the reader’s delightful memorability; well-worn poetic diction echoes the safe and cozy familiarity of courtship conventions; forced imagery is understood as the travel writer delivering the expected and hoped-for. But of course it is most of all the *narrative* of the Maid of Athens that has lingered, powerfully so, proving irresistible to dramatists and novelists for over a century after his death, with its depiction of Byron in his two most alluring characterizations: dashing English lover yearning for the exotic maiden and philhellenic savior devoting himself to Greece.

Those two images happen to present themselves in another, nearly forgotten maid of Athens’ tale. In Athens in 1810 Byron managed to dodge marrying Teresa Macri. But by the time he returned from his Grand Tour and submitted the manuscript of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* to John Murray he had, unknowingly, wed himself to not just one but two Maids of Athens for life—for at some point between arriving at the Macri household, composing “Maid of Athens, ere we part” and completing *Childe Harold*, he read about this other maid of Athens, Ida Rosemeli, the heroine of Sydney Owenson’s 1809 novel *Woman; or, Ida of Athens*. She lurks behind the scenes of Byron’s work and seems to have exerted a shaping pressure on his life.

Before you read on further—or before you turn from this essay in search of more serious ones worth your while—let me assure you that myth-perpetuation is *not* my aim. There has been plenty of complaint from Byron scholars about the attention given to the Byron myth—about

studying “Byron” instead of Byron. Reviewing Beaton’s *Byron’s War* in *Literary Review*, William St. Clair singles out recent biographers of Byron, all female, pointedly, for dwelling on Byron’s sexuality and allowing, even perpetuating, the myths. My reading mode is a sympathetic one, my observations focused on how difficult it was for the young poet Lord Byron to break out of the early mythologizing images he so powerfully created.

I’ve been searching, perhaps in vain, for a direct link between Byron and Sydney Owenson in the early days of their careers. What drives me (and others: Malcolm Kelsall, Silvia Bordoni, Evgenia Sifaki, Joseph Lew) are the uncanny parallels between *Woman; or, Ida of Athens* and Byron’s major poems—Kelsall, for instance, has argued that Byron “ravished” *Ida of Athens* “without compunction” for *Childe Harold* (14) and Bordoni that he drew upon it heavily for *Don Juan*. Both Owenson and Byron engaged in Romantic conventions of travel writing and of narrative and there are distinct echoes, if not outright borrowings, from Owenson’s work in his own. Both *Ida* and *Harold*, for instance, are often described using a trope of masking and unmasking, veiling and unveiling the face to reveal emotion beneath the surface. Here’s a typical description of *Ida*: “not infrequently, a shade of thought passed her brow, as if, though gay and happy from nature, she was pensive, and reflective from habit” (1.26). Compare this to *Childe Harold*: “Yet oft-times in his maddest mirthful mood / Strange pangs would flash along *Childe Harold*’s brow, / As if the memory of some deadly feud / Or disappointed passion lurk’d below” (I.VIII. 64-67). Both protagonists have secrets to hide: he of a love that can’t be made open, she of a former love now seemingly lost (as at this point in the novel she thinks her love Osmyn, exiled from Athens, has eloped with Jumeli, the darkly beautiful daughter of the Turkish *disdar-aga*).

More speculative are the correspondences between *Ida of Athens* and Byron's *life*. Publicly he dismissed the novel, deflecting any questions of influence; Caroline Franklin argues that this was a standard strategy for Byron, whose library records and private jottings show that he read women's writing and popular fiction and often enjoyed it even when outwardly declaring otherwise. Both Franklin, in *Female Romantics*, and Susan Wolfson, in *Romantic Interactions*, have been untangling the threads of the dense literary web of influence in which Byron and nineteenth-century female writers were enmeshed.ⁱⁱ In the case of *Ida of Athens*, publicly dismissing it was merely joining the club; Owenson herself called it a "bad book" and while it received some favorable reviews and sold reasonably well, it received some famously vicious reviews—most notably from a famously vicious reviewer, John Wilson Croker, who would be locked in a battle of wits with Owenson for decades. Byron could have championed it, although he too was anxious about being reviewed, by Gifford, for the same *Quarterly Review*.

The impressionable young poet who had been journeying Europe wondering just what to do with his life was presented in this novel with two competing visions of his future, two dramatic personae—the rakish English traveler Lord B and the patriotic Greek revolutionary Osmyn—that he would oscillate between for the rest of his life. (Lest that sound like theatrical overstatement let's just recall that "the rest of his life" would be merely fourteen more years.) I am following Malcolm Kelsall in finding *Ida of Athens* a "formative fiction" for Byron, that Sydney Owenson essentially "wrote" him, and I can appreciate Kelsall's more provocative and possibly tongue-in-cheek claim that she "led him into the disastrous cul-de-sac in which he died" (19). Seen in a more positive light, Ida Rosemeli—the novel's heroine—*reformed* Lord Byron, as she did the character Lord B—(and, in a different way, Osmyn) by giving all three men a sense of *purpose*, their reason for living. Greece made Byron a poet, he said (noting that we must

consider the source of this claim: Trelawny), but Ida Rosemeli may have made him a philhellene. In one-upping Sydney Owenson, he claimed the philhellenic mantle, and public face—and, we might say today, branding—for himself.

As Mary Shelley wrote (quoted in my epigraph above), “those events which materially influence our future destinies often derive their origin from a trivial occurrence” (qtd. in Beaton 138). When I suggest that Owenson’s *Ida of Athens* pushed Byron to become a philhellene, I mean that the competition with Owenson drove him to be more of a scholar and even diplomat than he might have been otherwise: he needed to get the details right, to understand the Greeks (that is, the modern, living Greeks), to be the spokesman who would tell the accurate story.ⁱⁱⁱ Beaton’s powerful argument in *Byron’s War* that it was the death of his dear friend and sparring partner Percy Shelley which served as a catalyst for Byron to take serious political action in Greece is persuasive, and mine is not trying to supersede it. That said, I want to press the power of reading, of literature, to help us in self-definition. As Mary Shelley recognizes so eloquently, often it is the seemingly trivial occurrences—we might think of the song lyrics, the celebrity interview, the television episode, the B-movie, or in this case, the popular genre fiction, the sentimental novel, that pulled on you, presented a picture that appealed, that gave a sense of what you wanted to be but could never admit the source of.

Mine will necessarily be an impressionistic tale; direct lines between Owenson and Byron are difficult to draw. Later on in their careers each could afford to openly admire the other’s work, but at the time of *Woman; or, Ida of Athens*, “Maid of Athens, ere we part,” and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* they were moving in the same orbit, writing for the same pool of readers, each concerned to claim ingenuity and authenticity. In 1808 they attended the same soiree in London, a reception hosted by the Countess of Cork, where Owenson (ordered to arrive with

Irish harp in hand) was being feted for the bestselling success of *The Wild Irish Girl*, enjoying the rush of fame and learning how to navigate the audience's identification of her with her heroine, as Byron would in just a few years with *Childe Harold*. In *The Book of the Boudoir*, written in 1829, she looks back at this "first rout" in London. On her way into the center of the salon, she found herself in a doorway mobbed with all the elegant young people of fashion and recollects:

my dazzled eyes rested for a moment on a strikingly sullen-looking, handsome creature, whose boyish person was distinguished by an air of singularity, which seemed to vibrate between hauteur and shyness. He stood with his arms crossed, and alone, occupying a corner near the door; and though in the bustling crowd, was 'not of it.' (75)

She recalls hearing "a pretty sprite of fashion" say "How do, Lord Byron?" to this man and having her mind leap to visions of "'les brave Birones' of English and French chivalry," explaining that "though Lord Byron had already made his first step in that career which ended in the triumph of his beautiful and powerful genius over all his contemporaries," she was not yet aware of him as such (76). Since *Woman; or, Ida of Athens* followed so soon after this event it is tempting to think that the first impression of this singular young man and the aura of the name "Lord Byron," with its ancient chivalric associations, made its way into her characterization of Lord B--.^{iv}

The novel *opens* with this figure, who remains unnamed until the fourth volume but seems tailor-made for Byron, as though Owenson knew him better than he knew himself. An English gentleman just arrived in Greece from Italy, who catches a glimpse of Ida reclining, odalisque-like, after her bath, and is captivated by her beauty. He is disturbed, though, by references to her great learning, which upsets his ideal: he thinks at one point, "it was impossible

to associate the idea of a ‘learned lady’ with the beautiful, the indolent, the pleasure-breathing Greek” (1.17), and at another moment we’re told “he trembled lest the learning and cleverness of Ida should betray themselves in the course of a political discussion, lest an axiom should banish a grace, or an argument disfigure a feature. Genius, feminine genius, he adored in woman, but at pedantry he shuddered” (1.23). Such a view resembles Byron’s commentary on *The Blues* and in his letters and journals which, in Marchand’s words, “are full of persiflage on boring literary ladies (and gentlemen)” (*Byron’s Poetry: A Critical Introduction* 35).^v Time spent with Ida, however, transforms this English traveler into a philhellene; soon he casts off his attachments to England and declares, “I am an Athenian!” When he is finally recalled home, he proposes she accompany him—as his *mistress*, not his wife. It will take multiple encounters but her steadfast refusals to be treated as an exotic plaything eventually reform him: “You have taught me,” he tells her, when they meet again in London in the fourth volume, “to discard the influence of an unjust and vulgar prejudice, which teaches that the genius of woman militates against her duties” (4.245). He could have ended up married to Ida (this tribute to her ends in a proposal) but he spoiled things by behaving badly; and besides, her heart had always belonged to another kind of man.

This rival of Lord B—and the second imagined path for Byron’s future—is Osmyn. Not a libertine, but a liberator. He’s a slave when we first meet him (the result of an earlier unsuccessful attempt at revolting against the Ottomans) but he is performing a heroic act: an expert archer, he kills a wolf that had been preying on the neighborhoods of Athens. Ida recognizes in his bravery and beauty perfect partnership material, telling him later, “I chose you because I believed you capable of a great passion, and of those heroic actions which a great passion alone inspires! . . . It was a hero—the champion of Liberty and of Greece—the friend of

Athens, and humanity” for whom she risks her life on at least two occasions, pleading with the Disdar Aga on Osmyn’s behalf (3.23, 24). They are forbidden to marry because of his unknown parentage and presumed low status but have a passionate, mutual love, united in the same goals; unlike the English gentleman he admires Ida’s intellect and becomes her joint strategist in planning the revolution. (Also, like Byron, Osmyn loves a good costume. He is a master of disguise.) In the end he has remained a steadfast patriot and devoted lover, and they marry and settle in Russia, where Osmyn becomes a general in the military, Ida raises patriotic children and they plot together the successful revolution from the safe shores of Catherine the Great’s philhellenic nation.

In these brief character sketches you can get a sense of the two life paths, the identities, which lay before twenty-two-year-old Lord Byron: would he live a life devoted to sensual pleasure, be a dashing, seductive, dangerous, but in the end self-loathing and remorseful rake? Or would he live a life of noble sacrifice, be a fearless, selfless, faithful lover and ardent warrior for the Greek cause? *Ida of Athens*, like other romantic novels of its ilk, was cast as featherweight stuff that women might use (unwisely) as a model for their behavior, but in this case it looks to have been a powerful shaper of a divided man.

What’s hard to determine is just *when* Byron read *Ida of Athens*. The novel was published in December of 1809, about the time he and Hobhouse were making their way to the Macri household in Athens. He had begun writing *Childe Harold* in Ioannina two months earlier. We know that he has read *Ida of Athens* by the time *Childe Harold* is published in March of 1812 because of the famous note to Canto II in which he airily dismisses the authority of “Miss Owenson” by reprimanding her for her lack of intimate knowledge of the ranks of Ottoman administrators: “when she next borrows an Athenian heroine for her four volumes,” he quips, let

her “have the goodness to marry her to somebody more of a gentleman than a ‘Disdar Aga’ (who by the by is not an Aga)” and condescendingly adds, “I speak it tenderly, seeing [as] I was once the cause of the husband of ‘Ida of Athens’ nearly suffering the bastinado” (137). This comment, which leads off a long note filled with his own first-hand observations, dated and located journal entries, and policy recommendations is, in Kelsall’s words, “a snub to a competitor” (13). Byron revised *Childe Harold* when he returned to England in July 1811; perhaps he read the novel at that point and was inspired to beef up his Notes under the anxiety of influence. His correspondence with Hobhouse around this time shows his superior familiarity with and knowledge of the modern Greeks, Albanians, and important local leaders such as Ali Pasha; in a letter of October 14, 1811 he tells Hobhouse “I have lately been sweating Notes” for *Childe Harold* (qtd. in Cochran 45). He takes issue with others’ errors about Greece and looks forward to publicizing them^{vi} and presenting himself as the expert on this subject, as he does with relish in the note critiquing Owenson. The extensive notes to *Childe Harold* out-footnote Owenson, whose learned footnotes are embedded everywhere in her novel. Although he hadn’t shown much interest in being a scholar of Greece while traveling there (in contrast to Hobhouse—and Byron’s are the notes of a politician, not an antiquarian), he now needed to prove his philhellenic authority against competing romanticizers of Greece.

Byron had created his own portrait of a maid of Athens and her English admirer. The timing doesn’t seem possible for Byron to have read *Ida of Athens* before his three-month stay with the Macris (from Christmas Day 1809 to March 10, 1810), but I’m intrigued with how the *mode* of “Maid of Athens, ere we part” is so similar to that of Owenson’s novel. Stanzas such as “Maid of Athens, ere we part, / Give, oh give me back my heart! / Or, since that has left my breast, / Keep it now, and take the rest!” (1-4) mirror the feverishly romantic mode of *Ida of*

Athens with its breathless rush of exclamation points; while composed for Teresa Macri it reads like a plea from Lord B to Ida Rosemeli: “Ida! I love you to idolatry, to madness—the whole earth contains nothing half so precious, so necessary to my happiness! (1.46). As Marchand notes, the tone of “Maid of Athens” is of “longing,” not of “possession” (*Byron’s Poetry* 232).^{vii} Lord Byron may have tired of Teresa; Lord B-- would never possess Ida of Athens.

To scholars today, connections between *Ida of Athens* and Byron seem conspicuous—even, as I remarked above, *uncanny*; was that not true for early nineteenth-century readers? It appears to me that over the years these maids of Athens, Teresa and Ida, were elided, merged into one, palimpsested. Here’s a case in point: on May 25, 1824, barely a month after the death of Byron in Missolonghi, C. E. Walker submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s office the manuscript of a two-act “melodramatic spectacle,” *The Revolt of the Greeks; or, the Maid of Athens*. It was approved by George Colman the Younger four days later and appears to have been produced on June [10?] at Drury Lane (Nicoll 526).^{viii} The title *The Revolt of the Greeks* puts it in the category of philhellenic dramas that were all the rage in the 1820s; its subtitle “the maid of Athens” makes it appear to be a play that will stage the drama of the lyric poem and feature Byron as a character. The title page, however, announces this play to be “founded” not on Byron’s “Maid of Athens” but on “Lady Morgan’s *Ida of Athens*.” In the *dramatis personae* the heroine is described as “Ida, the maid of Athens”; the original title of the play was *Rosemeli or the Maid of Athens*.^{ix} Walker’s play, then, appears to be linking the narrative of Byron and Teresa Macri with the tale of *Ida of Athens*. Yet upon reading the play you discover that it’s neither: that *Rosemeli* in the original title is the father of *Ida* and the plot centers on a father-daughter relationship; it’s much more reminiscent of Arthur Murphy’s 1772 *The Grecian Daughter*, which had continued to be a big hit and was worth replicating. The cast list includes a

villainous “Governor of Athens” named Achmet (which was the Disdar-Aga’s name in *Ida of Athens*), but after that the parallels quickly fade away. The closest character to an Osmyn is an Athenian Chief named Lysander, but there’s no romance with Ida. The action takes place entirely in Athens, which means there’s no flight to cold, inhospitable London for contrast to Greece and, most important: no Lord B character. It makes sense for a playwright being produced on the London stage to steer clear of the Irish novelist Owenson’s sharp critique of England in her final volume, but I wonder why Lord B is eliminated altogether. From the standpoint of 2013 looking back to 1824, it seems that C. E. Walker is overlooking a golden opportunity to capitalize directly on Byron’s “Maid of Athens” right after his death.

(In 1829, John Baldwin Buckstone will seize that opportunity, in a melodrama in four acts called, in a title reversal from Walker’s play, *The Maid of Athens; or, the Revolt of the Greeks*. Byron *is* a character in this one—quite fully a politician and military leader, not a poet, and not a lover. And there *is* a maid of Athens, but she is English, not Greek; her name is Madeline and she is the lover of Byron but of a young Greek revolutionary, not Osmyn—and not Lysander—but, playing off of Walker’s earlier drama, perhaps, *Demetrius*.)^x

In the closing stanza of “Maid of Athens, ere we part,” when Byron wrote “Can I cease to love thee? No!” he had no idea just how deeply he was wedding himself to the maid(s) of Athens. One maid of Athens, Ida of Athens, has been so imperceptibly merged with Teresa Macri as to have become erased, but Byron has never been able to completely divorce himself from her sway. Byron “may well not have known, himself, why he” went to Greece in 1823, Roderick Beaton observes; “some of the explanations he gave, afterwards, sound almost as though he is trying to explain himself to himself” (137). We are always rewriting our lives,

competing with the forces that are writing us—and finally, succumbing to those that posthumously write us.

Notes

A draft of this essay was presented at the International Byron Conference in London, July 2013. I would like to thank Roderick Beaton, David Roessel, and Alex Grammatikos for their comments and ideas.

ⁱ I am grateful to Roderick Beaton, who quotes this observation, though in support of an argument that would oppose my own, in *Byron's War*, 138. See *The Original Frankenstein* 63, as well as 259 and 27 (in the editor's introduction).

ⁱⁱ Franklin's narrative describes how "women's fiction of the earlier nineteenth century influenced, interacted with, or responded to the poetry and life story of Byron" (1) while Wolfson argues that he "gets created, as a literary consciousness, in a web of reciprocally transforming and transformative creative subjects" (2).

ⁱⁱⁱ As Alex Grammatikos noted in his paper, "Byron in the archives: Modern Greek print culture and Byronic philhellenism," this story may have been of a not-so-Hellenic Greece—the Romaic Greece desired by one major faction in the revolution, the autochthonous Greeks.

^{iv} According to Silvia Bordoni, they *met* for the first time in 1812. In a letter to her close friend Alicia Lefanu on June 7, 1812, Owenson, by this time Lady Morgan, commented: "Lord Byron, the author of delightful *Childe Harold* (which has more *force, fire, and thought* than anything I have read for an age) is cold, silent, and reserved in his manners, - pray read it if you have not. When I was in London, Lord Greville read me a poem of his own on the same subject as *Childe Harold*. The rival lords published their poems the same day; the one is cried up to the skies, the other, alas, is cried down to ____!" (*Memoirs*, II, 21; qtd. in Bordoni) Morgan also attended Byron's funeral in 1824.

^v As Caroline Franklin points out, however, Byron *privately* read and learned from women's works. For instance, of de Stael he noted in his journal, "I have read her books—like most of them and delight in the last" (i.e., *Germany*) (*BLJ* 3.207; qtd. in *The Female Romantics* 21).

^{vi} In this same letter to Hobhouse he writes, "I had also by accident detected {in Athens} a blunder of Thornton of a ludicrous nature in the Turkish language of which I mean to make some 'pleasant mirth', in return for his abuse of the Greeks" (qtd. in Cochran 45).

^{vii} "It may have been on the eve of his departure that he wrote, or at least began, his now famous lines" (*Byron: A Biography* 1.232). "Byron's libertine proclivities were entirely compatible with such a detached admiration, though the two tendencies were frequently at war in him" (1.232).

^{viii} I haven't yet found any evidence of its having been published. The sole copy in the British Library is of the manuscript that was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain.

^{ix} The British Library catalogue copy lists *The Revolt of the Greeks* as "altered from" *Rosemeli, or the Maid of Athens*.

^x I have written about this elsewhere. Please see Amy Muse, "'Encountering Ali Pasha on the London Stage: No Friend to Freedom?'" *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture & Criticism*. 17.3 (2011): 340-350.

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