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THE RECEPTION OF THE ARGONAUTS BY LORD BYRON

At the age of twenty one Lord Byron started his travels to the east visiting Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Malta and Greece. He never reached Georgia though he had planned that is reflected in his poetic lines of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*:

Yet once again, adieu! Ere this the sail
That wafts me hence is shivering in the gale;
And Afric's coast and Calpe's adverse height,
And Stamboul's minarets must greet my sight;
Thence shall I stray through beauty's native clime
Where Kaff is clad in rocks, and crown'd with snows sublime.

Comments which appear in many publications confirm that under "beauty's native clime" Byron meant Georgia.

When Byron approached the Bosphorus from the Black Sea he dared to climb the Cyanean Symplegades that were supposed to be the fabled ones the Argonauts passed on their way to seek the Golden Fleece. It was the nurse's dole in the Medea that encouraged him. He wrote about it in a letter to his friend saying: "Had not this sublime passage been in my head, I should never have dreamed of ascending the rocks." When standing on the very summit of those blue rocks he composed a rollicking six-line parody of the nurse's dole:

O How I wish that an embargo
Had kept in port the good ship Argo!
Who, still unlaunch'd from Grecian docks,
Had never pass'd the Azure rocks;
But now I fear her trip will be a
Damn'd business for my Miss Medea.

When the ram with a golden fleece vaulted into the air, it had a boy and a girl on its back, the two children of Athamas, the king in Thessaly. Taking his course to the east, the ram crossed the strait between Europe and Asia. The girl named Helle fell from his back into the sea which from her was called Hellespont. The mythological Hellespont or the present Dardanelles is especially famous for its myth of brave Leander crossing the strait for his beloved Hero.

The ram with a golden fleece continued his career and brought the boy and the fleece to the kingdom of Colchis, Medea's homeland.

According to Apollonius of Rhodes when the ship Argo sailed towards Colchis, the ominous wing-beats of a huge eagle were heard by the Argonauts with Jason. Fluttering her enormous wings that bird of prey flew to the Caucasus mount where Prometheus was chained to rip open his flesh and tear his liver.

The present paper that focuses mainly on Medea, Prometheus, Leander and Hellespont argues that the reception of the Argonauts by Byron is special.

In literature the East stirred the souls of Romantic poets and writers. Byron produced "Childe Harold" as the result of his journey to the East – Spain, Portugal, Malta, Turkey and Greece. On Greece he said the following: "If I am a poet I owe it to Greece."

Of course, the Argonauts and the connected characters were a rich source of stylistic allusions for poets and artists of different ages. But in case of Byron all seems to be distinguished.

Byron's poetry is a unique example of a text that extremely abounds with quotations and allusions as stylistic means when biblical, mythological, literary or historical images are called forth as vessels into which new contents are poured, offering a kind of interplay between the meanings.

The whole world appears to be reflected in Byron's consciousness as a result of his voracious reading and highly developed imagination.

According to Thomas Moore since the age of five Byron was an avid and omnivorous reader, perusing everything that came his way.¹

In case of Byron the function of allusions as stylistic means appears to be absolutely unique. Lord Byron not only alludes to mythological, biblical, literary or historical characters, but is mystically guided by them in real life. To be more precise Byron is in constant touch with them challenging them and competing with them, thus reincarnating their lives and images. With

¹ Th. Moore, *Letters and Journals of the Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life*, 2 vols., London, John Murray, 1830-31.

Byron allusions are beyond the limits of stylistic means and become the real ways of his life.

Byron crossed the Hellespont in emulation of Leandre.

Leander was a youth of Abydos, a town of the Asian side of the strait which separates Asia and Europe. On the opposite shore in the town of Sestos lived the maiden Hero, a priestess of Venus. Leander loved her, and used to swim the strait nightly to enjoy the company of his mistress, guided by a torch which she reared upon the tower, for the purpose. But one night a tempest arose and the sea was rough; his strength failed, and he was drowned. The waves bore his body to the European shore, where Hero became aware of his death, and in her despair cast herself down from the tower into the sea and perished.

The story of Leander's swimming the Hellespont was looked upon as fabulous, and the feat considered impossible, especially due to the icy currents, till Lord Byron proved its possibility by performing it himself.

Byron alludes to this story in "The Bride of Abydos" and in the poem "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos". The Poem is written after crossing the Dardanelles – the mythological Hellespont, famous in real life for its icy currents thus bringing to life Leander's experience as an example of courage and devotion. The poem confirms not only his feat but the poet's talent to humour it:

Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos

If, in the month of dark December,
Leander, who was nightly wont
(What maid will not the tale remember?)
To cross thy stream, broad Hellespont!

If, when the wintry tempest roared,
He sped to Hero, nothing loth,
And thus of old thy current poured,
Fair Venus! how I pity both!

For my, degenerate modern wretch,
Though in the genial month of May,
My dripping limbs I faintly stretch,
And think I've done a feat to-day.

But since he crossed the rapid tide,
According to the doubtful story,
To woo, – and – Lord knows what beside,
And swam for Love, as I for Glory;

'Twere hard to say who fared the best:
 Sad mortals! thus the Gods still plague you!
 He lost his labour, I my jest:
 For he was drowned, and I've the ague.

Byron anew linked Europe and Asia not only through his poetry that is so rich with Eastern motifs but established a symbolic bridge through his feat.

Since Byron's time the feat has been achieved by others including our contemporary swimmers – Nick McCann from Nottingham, Byron's home place and Henri Kuprashvili from Tbilisi; yet it remains a test of strength and skill in the art of swimming.

Byron's early poetic lines include the translation of the nurse's dole from Euripides' *Medea*. Comparison with the original Greek shows that a considerable liberty has been taken with the original.

In Euripides, a chorus of Corinthian women contemplate, sympathetically, the plight of Medea, a cast-off, foreign wife with two small children and nowhere to go. Love, they reflect, can take either of two forms: a madness of desire and strife, or a temperate attraction leading women peacefully to the marriage bed. The first is Medea's situation; the Chorus itself prays fervently to be granted the second. Two kinds of love figure in Byron's translation as well, but neither involves the marriage bed.

"Whose heart may mingle pure with mine / With me to live, with me to die", – are Byron's words from the translation, though this scenario is alien to Euripides.

Byron develops and creates his own image of Medea to follow the lines "With me to live, with me to die". Byron is haunted by this image in most of his female characters to start from early pieces including his final unaccomplished masterpiece "Don Juan". But at the same time Byron is aspiring to Colchian Medea and is in search for her in real life. He fell in love with a simple Venetian woman, Margarita Cogni in so far as she reminded him of Medea, whom he brought to Palazzo Mochenigo to live with him. The letter of Moore dated 19 September 1818 is one of several describing Margarita Cogni:

"I am sure if I put a poniard into the hand of this one, she would plunge it where I told her, – and into me, if I offended her. I like this kind of animal, and am sure that I should have preferred Medea to any woman that ever breathed. You may, perhaps, wonder that I don't in that case take to my wife. But she is a poor mawkish, moral Clytemnestra (and no Medea) who likes to be vindictive according to law... (BLJ VI. 68 and XI 197)."

But in another letter Byron speaks on Lady Byron as of "mathematical Medea". If Colchian Medea was a sorceress Miss Anabella Millbank, his

future wife, attracted him not only due to her talent of poetry, but due to her deep knowledge of mathematics as well. Byron never deserted her like Jason. It was Lady Byron who appeared to be involved into a slander and scandal against the poet, divorced him and became his most dangerous and revengeful enemy. But it's worse saying, that on the day of the divorce she locked herself in her room rolling across the floor in the agony from pain of separation as if having in mind Byronic words on Medea: "With you to live with you to die." Separation was not less painful for Byron himself:

Every feeling hath been shaken;
Pride, which not a world could bow,
Bows to thee – by thee forsaken,
Even my soul forsakes me now:

Fiery love and demonic revenge distinguished his beloved ladies including famous and notorious Lady Caroline Lamb, the wife of the future Prime Minister of Britain.

"Your heart – my poor Caro... what a little volcano! That pours lava through your veins" – wrote Byron indulgently in 1812. This volcanic lady from a highly aristocratic family proved to be as vindictive and revengeful as Lady Byron or Jason's Colchian spouse, far more dangerous than a baker's wife, Margarita Cogni though he had enough of her tantrums in Palazzo Mochenigo in Venice.

Lord Byron's "Manfred" caused a lot of discussion as to whether it was borrowed from Marlowe, Goethe or Aeschylus. Byron remarked that he had never read Goethe's "Faust", as he knew no German, and he also denied Marlowe as his progenitor. However of "Prometheus Bound" by Aeschylus he wrote the following:

"Of the "Prometheus" of Aeschylus I was passionately fond as a boy, (it was one of the Greek plays we read thrice a year at Harrow;) indeed that and the "Medea" were the only ones, which ever much pleased me. The Prometheus if not exactly in my plan, has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or anything that I have written."

Napoleon who succeeded in toppling legitimist monarchs, who managed to liberate the oppressed, had become an idol for a liberally-minded progressive young lord.

Byron's attachment to Napoleon appears to be complicated. Byron equates Napoleon to Prometheus and at the same time is aspiring to the contemporary hero. Byron considers Napoleon to be a liberator.

The critical attitude to his beloved figure permits Byron to distinguish a hero who fought against despotic regimes from that of an emperor striving to

dominate the continent. "I deny nothing but doubt everything" – are Lord Byron's words.

Disappointed in Napoleon, Byron aims to produce deeds far more important and significant than composing poetry.

At the age of 26 the author of "Childe Harold" announced an apparently quite serious resolution to withdraw from poetry. "No one should be a rhymer who could be anything better..."

In April, 1814 a Gazette Extraordinary announced the abdication of Fontainebleau.

Next morning the poet violated his vows by composing "Ode to Napoleon Bounaparte" – the strictest condemnation of Napoleon ever done in poetry.

I

'Tis done – but yesterday a King!
 And arm'd with Kings to strive –
 And now thou art a nameless thing:
 So abject – yet alive!

"Ode to Napoleon" offers a whole gallery of great men of the world from ancient times to George Washington, the Cincinnatus of the west, as compared to Napoleon. Prometheus is among them in stanza XVI:

XVI

Or, like the thief of fire from heaven,
 Wilt thou withstand the shock?
 And share with him, the unforgiven,
 His vulture and his rock!
 Foredoom'd by God – by man accurst,
 And that last act, though not thy worst,
 The very Fiend's arch mock;
 He in his fall preserved his pride,
 And, if a mortal, had as proudly died!

Byron very much hoped that Napoleon would reincarnate Prometheus but, alas, in vain.

Disappointed in Napoleon, at least subconsciously, Byron aims to reincarnate the mythological liberator. And it took him exactly ten years from composing the "Ode" on the 10th April, 1814, to fulfil the mission of the liberator of Greece and die as proudly as Prometheus did.

Byron died on 19th April, 1824. His death at Missolonghi in Greece shocked the world and unified Hellas.

Many European Philhellenists supported the liberation of Greece from Turkey but they shed blood in their literary lines only. Byron was an exception to dedicate himself to Greece.

As it appears Napoleon is a long-lasting attachment for Byron. In our opinion this attachment proves to be artistic and is aimed to perform Napoleon on the very stage of life.

Performing Napoleon Byron was *perfecting* him through his acts.

Granting the Emperor's hegemony in the realm of deeds Byron refused to defer in the realm of words. "As Napoleon had conquered by battles, so Byron would conquer by poetry."²

"Triumphs won by words outlast triumphs won by deeds",³ but we are happy to add that the Byronic victory was never gained by words only.

Byron won the victory mainly by his devotion and self-sacrifice. It was the unique case when power of words and power of deeds coincided and converged. Byron never spared his life, he showed the world his readiness to die and died for Greece – the point that was missing in the Napoleonic legend. Byron became the symbol of disinterested patriotism and with the final winning of Independence, his name became even brighter in Greece.

Before closing I would like to add that the Argonauts, Medea, Prometheus, Hero and Leander are the focal points that help us trace the cultural links not only between Byron and Greece but between Byron and Georgia as well.

² J. Clubbe, *Napoleon's Last Campaign and the Origins of Don Juan*, *The Byron Journal*, London, 1997, 21.

³ *Ibid.*