Ghislaine McDayter takes the twenty-first century academic’s uncritical obsession with celebrity culture down from the washing-line, and wrings it dry. She’s a kind of female, intellectual Rupert Everett – though with one vital difference, as we shall see.

She wants us to acknowledge the “fan” lurking within even the most beady-eyed literary critic:

… the following pages will encourage a reading of Byron that refuses to close down on the pleasurable fantasies inspired by even the most “pedestrian” of muses, the muse of popular culture.¹

McDayter gives us one such pleasurable fantasy:

We are still incapable of discussing his work without first indulging in a mental picture of the man, either striding toward a helpless (female) victim, cloak blowing and shirt open, or desperately trying to disentangle himself from his adoring herd. What, I would ask, do we get out of this?²

What I would ask is, “Where do you get this image from?” A man striding towards a helpless female victim occurs nowhere in Byron’s work. But in the postmodern twenty-first century, post-9 / 11, who needs evidence? “Pleasurable [or profitable] fantasy” is all.

Our mandarin failure to acknowledge that Childe Harold truly resides – as Rupert Everett says – in the same continuum as Ziggy Stardust, cuts us off, argues Professor McDayter, not only from Byron, but from ourselves:

The many critical attempts to uncover the truth of Byron, whether in his textual or material remains, have failed precisely because what we find “buried” is not Byron at all, but the phantasmatic embodiment of our own desire.³

Thus we are all fans, even though we don’t acknowledge it. Jerome Christensen and Edna O’Brien (for example) are at one with the lady described by Mary Shelley to Thomas Moore on July 4th 1827, while researching his Life of Byron:

Mrs. Shelley … told me of some lady (English, of course) in Italy, who hearing that his monkeys were then in the town where she was (following Byron’s route) sent to entreat the servant to have one of them to pass the night in her room … ⁴

“Critiquing” Don Juan in a cultural-materialist idiom, and taking one of Byron’s monkeys to bed with you, are thus activities sharing a common denominator.

Actually, despite John Murray’s worry about the effect it would have on women, we don’t, it seems, get the true fan thrill from reading Don Juan, because

Byron’s later work is redeemed by its attempts to motivate political activism (Don Juan) while his romances set out to seduce his feminine audience (the Turkish Tales).⁵

---

¹: McDayter p.28.
²: McDayter p.4.
³: McDayter p.181.
⁴: Moore, Journal III 1040.
⁵: McDayter p.33.
McDayter seems here to be paraphrasing a viewpoint with which she disagrees, but you’re not sure. She’s very good at summing-up alternative perspectives, while leaving her own evaluation of them cloudy. But the outline of her argument is clear: we are all fans, and should acknowledge the fact by valuing those poems which appeal to the fan in us – not those, like *Don Juan*, which mock the fan in us:

Oh! “darkly, deeply, beautifully blue.”
As Some One somewhere sings about the Sky,
And I, ye learned ladies! say of you;
They say your stockings are so (Heaven knows why –
I have examined few pair of that hue)
Blue as the Garters which serenely lie
Round the Patrician left-legs, which adorn
The festal Midnight, and the Levee Morn. –6

Professor McDayter’s main literary stress is indeed on the Turkish Tales – or at least on *The Giaour, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair*, and *Lara*. In the book’s best section (pp.59-102) she offers an analysis of those works which argues that their heroes, so far from being seductive, as in the cliché, operate in reality as patriarchal oppressors and deferrers of all desire, including their own. In *The Corsair*,

Medora … is the embodiment of sensuality. She resides in a tower protected by the pirates and filled with the spoils of their battles. It is a pleasure palace of wine, lilting song, sherbets, and soft flesh, and it exists for Conrad almost as a constant scourge. He does not surrender to its pleasures, but rather takes pleasure in the repeated denial of his desire. If the Freudian hysteric is a subject who desires endlessly to desire, deferring satisfaction at all costs, then Conrad certainly fits the psychoanalytic bill.7

We are reminded of the theory that Othello falls for Iago’s lies because they support his subconscious desire to avoid sexual consummation with Desdemona.

Byron’s Tales are thus, as narratives, neither realistic nor romantic, but Freudian psycho-scenarios which arouse erotic expectation only to postpone its gratification indefinitely – leading to hysteria in their largely female readership. The big difference between the McDayter reading and the Rupert Everett reading is that Professor McDayter doesn’t follow Everett into speculating logically that the heroes of the Turkish Tales are all closet gays (that’s what Everett would say, if he’d read any Byron).

She gives, on p.63, an illustration to *The Corsair*, showing Medora trying to give Conrad a hug, while Conrad stares, with apparent indifference, out to sea. In fact I believe he’s staring at his “bark” in the harbour, where resides the true focus of his desire, young Gonsalvo:

His eyes of pride to young Gonsalvo turn;
Why doth he start, and inly seem to mourn?
Alas! those eyes beheld his rocky tower,
And live a moment o’er the parting hour;
She – his Medora – did she mark the prow?
Ah! never loved he half so much as now!
But much must yet be done ere dawn of day –
Again he mans himself and turns away;
Down to the cabin with Gonsalvo bends,
And there unfolds his plan, his means, and ends … 8

“Ah! never loved he half so much as now” – but whom? His love for the young woman is in fact a repressed and transferred desire for the young man. But Professor McDayter has no room for Queer Theory – all her stress is on female fans. She would be intrigued to know that rumour did indeed credit Byron himself with a manipulative urge to defer his most famous female fan’s gratification. Moore’s diary for November 10th 1827 reads:

[[Lady Elisabeth Auckland relates that]] Lord Byron did [[(as she [Caroline Lamb] tells in Glenarvon Q.E.E.)]]endeavour to make her think that he had murdered some one—never would give her his right hand—wore a glove on it &c. &c. This at first alarmed [Lady Caroline], but when she came to know him better, she saw through his acting—Very evident from her account (Lady E.

6: Byron, *Don Juan* IV st.110.
7: McDayter pp.93-4.
8: Byron, *The Corsair*, ll.577-86.
Said) that he had no passion—used to keep Lady Caroline off, she, by her own expression, being always making an offer of herself to him—one evening that she did so, he said—"No—no—not this evening—you have been dining at Holland House, and it would not be beau." (what abomination!)—He was continually, too, impressing upon her the great crime it would be—reminding her of her love—L.Lamb &c. &c. The fact is, it was Byron’s first liaison with anything above the common & he wanted to make the most of it—The apparatus with which he surrounded the evening, when at last he yielded to it, seems to have been almost incredibly absurd—her head resting upon a skull, a case of loaded pistols between them, &c. &c.—I must enquire more about this …

The psychotic need to frustrate female sexuality which Professor McDayter finds in his poems, Byron may have exercised in real life.

Professor McDayter avoids any mention of two Turkish Tales: The Siege of Corinth and Parisina (the latter set in Italy and thus not Turkish). They do not fit her thesis, since in Siege the necessity for deferring consummation is unquestionable, as the heroine is dead throughout; and in Parisina consummation is achieved within twenty-eight lines of the start:

But it is not to list to the waterfall
That Parisina leaves her hall,
And it is not to gaze on the heavenly light
That the lady walks in the shadow of night;
And if she sits in Este’s bower,
’Tis not for the sake of its full-blown flower –
She listens – but not for the nightingale –
Though her ear expects as soft a tale.
There glides a step through the foliage thick,
And her cheek grows pale – and her heart beats quick.
There whispers a voice through the rustling leaves,
And her blush returns, and her bosom heaves!
A moment more – and they shall meet –
’Tis past – her lover’s at her feet. 10

Such an inversion of what Professor McDayter claims is Byron’s normal method has to be airbrushed out.

An unusual conjunction of ideas occurs at this point in Professor McDayter’s argument:

What did political radicalism, mob violence, and desire have to do with fandom? And what were the relations between the revolutionary fanatic and the literary fan? 11

The frustrated literary / sexual fan and the persecuted political / radical fanatic are identified as being one:

What makes them “pathological” in the eyes of culture is their refusal to participate in the dominating fantasy of stability and coherence. The radical democrat, like the hysterical fanatic, is driven instead by the desire to forestall closure and stability—to retain the “emptiness” at identity’s core, be it in the body politic or in the individual subject, in order to ensure the space for mobility, multiplicity, and freedom. 12

In this analysis, a radical like Sir Francis Burdett, who wanted cities like Sheffield and Birmingham to have representation at Westminster, and a fan like Caroline Lamb, who was frustrated in her desire to have sex with Byron, are in reality after the same thing: “to forestall closure and stability”. At least that’s what I think Professor McDayter means: the political dimension of her argument is hard to tie-in with the actual radical politics of Byron’s day, where there were polite radicals like Burdett and Major Cartwright, and impolite radicals like Arthur Thistlewood, hanged because he fell for the Home Office agent provocateur who inspired Cato Street. Thistlewood wanted to murder the entire cabinet as they sat at dinner, then take over the Bank of England and give all the money there to the poor: would that be “to forestall closure and stability”? What’s the difference between it and the kind of “political activism” that Professor McDayter claims Don Juan to inspire?

10: Byron, Parisina, Part II.
11: McDayter p.137.
Byron found his fan-letters amusing: “– do you remember Constantia and Echo – and la Swissesse – and all my other inamorati – when I was ‘gentle and juvenile – curly and gay’ – and was myself in love with a certain Silly person”13 he writes to his half-sister, in 1822. However, the more market-conscious John Murray recognised their writers as important consumer-targets: “As to ‘a poem in the old way to interest the women’ – {as you call it;} I shall attempt of that kind nothing further,” snarls Byron to him in 182214 (by this time he is of course writing his “later work [which] is redeemed by its attempts to motivate political activism”).

The main evidence for the Byron fandom phenomenon is the cache of fan letters in the John Murray Archive (now at the National Library of Scotland). They were not published in Byron’s lifetime, were not, contrary to what Professor McDayter claims (p.155) published in Paston and Quennell’s To Lord Byron15 – and we find to our amazement that Professor McDayter uses as few of them as possible. They should be her primary evidence of deferral and hysteria. In fact her brief use of what little she does use is totally unscrupulous. On her third page she claims to quote one of them:

To Lord Byron, who talks of loving in a voice so sweet, yet says his heart can never love again.
Who bids the heart with wildest throbbing beat? Yet gives no balsam to assuage its pain? Should curiosity prompt you and should you not be afraid of gratifying it by trusting yourself alone in Green Park at seven o’clock this evening, you will see Echo.16

This is in fact two letters. One is in verse (as you can tell, despite Professor McDayter’s attempt to disguise the fact), the other in prose. They are, in McDayter’s version just printed, run together and heavily cut. Here are the originals:

1: To Lord Byron

Who talks of loving in a voice so sweet?
Yet says his heart can never love again.
Who bids the heart with wildest throbbings beat?
Yet gives no balsam to assuage its pain.

Is it for thee blooming in youthful prime
The sweets of love for ever to forego?
And wand’ring thus alone from clime to clime,
Abjure all joy but the joy of woe?

Ah, true! “The keenest pangs the wretched find
“Are rapture to the dreary void
“The leafless desart of the mind,
“The waste of feelings unemploy’d”

But, ah! Why are those feelings unemploy’d?
Exists there not on earth a kindred mind?
Lives there no one, whose bosom would have joy’d
To calm that soul too tenderly refin’d?

Is there no one who like thee too may hate
May loath the languor of a life of rest?
Who now may pine in sad unvarying state
That wand’ring with thee had been truly blest?

And if thy wounded heart she could not cure,
Thy mind, at least might have had pow’r to calm.
Have taught thee life unloathing to endure,
And pour’d into thy soul sweet friendship’s balm.

Oh, Byron! thou hast known enough of <xxxx> {pain.}
But like the tender bird that sweetly sings,
Pierc’d by the thorn, more lovely is thy strain,
Writing from agony’s deep piercing stings.

---

13: Byron to Augusta Leigh, November 7th 1822 (text from NLS Acc.12604 / 4151; BLJ X 28-30).
14: Byron to Murray, March 15th 1822: (text from NLS Acc.12604 / 4160F; BLJ IX 125-6).
15: Paston and Quennell have only well-known, named correspondents.
16: Quoted McDayter, p.3.
Then oh! if thou hast suffer’d, learn to feel!
And glory not in giving hopeless pain,
To tenderness thy breast no longer steel,
Soften thy heart, or harsher be thy strain!

Echo

Should curiosity prompt you, and should you not be afraid of gratifying it, by trusting yourself alone in the Green Park at seven o’clock this evening, you will see Echo. If this evening prove inconvenient, the same chance shall still await you tomorrow evening at the same hour. Be on that side of the Green Park that has the gate opening onto Piccadilly, and leave the rest to Echo.

Should apathy or indifference prevent your coming, adieu for ever!17

In her only other quotation from the fan letters, McDayter compresses sentences from three of them into one paragraph:

For further evidence of this [readers identifying with romance heroes] we need only return to Byron’s fan mail. For while, as Byron points out, many of these fans hope to “convert” him, it is not because they see themselves as the virtuous heroine who will redeem the Byronic misanthropist. It is because they identify with the poet’s misanthropy. I do not write, says one fan, to sigh over poetry but rather because “[I am] one whose deeply wounded spirit has occasioned in early youth for several years past, to shun all society as an intolerable annoyance.” Another says that she writes because “I have known what it is to have my youth blighted.” Still another, signing herself “Anna,” notes that she has been “indebted to [Byron’s] muse for soothing & interesting some of my saddest hours. I have wept over Childe Harold’s griefs & sympathized in his wrongs.” This letter, she notes, was composed during a time of deep pain, the severity of which only Byron could understand.18

Here is the second half of “Anna’s” letter:

Anxious, to look for each succeeding Morn
Tho, deeper sorrow clos’d the parting day
And when of every lingering hope bereft
With trembling anguish o’er her Couch I hung
’Twas mine, with smiles, to hide a bursting heart
& force to words of joy a faltering tongue

At length ’twas o’er, the lovely Victim sunk
Unconscious sunk, beneath the unfelt blow,
Unchang’d by pain her angel face remain’d,
And death sat smiling on her placid brow

The heartfelt pangs of life’s last Scene were mine,
Her gentle Soul, no parting anguish knew,
And with one Sigh its mortal bonds dissolv’d
Back to its native heaven’s unfetter’d flow.

But tho ascended like the ethereal flame,
To lights blest source, the Bosom of her God,
Still like an angel, may she view my tears,
With tender pity, from her blest abode.

When round our hearth, we weep her vacant place
Her gentle Spirit, still may near us dwell
Still, tho unseen, beside us may she walk,
Now guarding those, whom here she lov’d so well.

These lines, are part of some compos’d at a time, [ms tear] after, When suffering under the Severe afflictions to [ms tear] relate & of which the deep & sad remembrance still unnerves my frame, & has darken’d the morning of my life. alas I grieve to say, that at a time when I so much wanted

17: Text from National Library of Scotland Acc.12604 / 4241.
18: McDayter p.166.
consolation, I experienced the most cruel indifference to my griefs from one who, I had a right to expect, should have wiped away my tears or wept with me –

“before the Chastner humbly let me bow”
our hearth divided and our hopes destroyed.”

enough I have now fulfilled the principal object of my letter which was may I venture to say it, to entreat you not to leave your Native Country & waste your precious days, in Solitude & perhaps despondency, & tho. I may be thought enthusiastic & Visionary, still I feel gratified, that I have done my part, all I could do, & tho. I have not the vain presumption to think, that what I can say, has any weight with you, my Lord, still I was never easy till I had performed this task till I had pour’d forth my heart before you, & only entreat that you will not show a letter to any one, Spare me & let it sink in oblivion, perhaps this, I sometimes think, which was written in the fullness of my heart may be an object of contempt & ridicule to you, however I shall not witness what would be, to me, a cruel mortification, 

“L'error d’un infelice e degno di pieta
May God ever bless & protect you, Lord Byron

Anna

Kensington Palace

“Anna”, it will be seen, does not “hope to ‘convert’” Byron, neither does she see herself “as the virtuous heroine who will redeem the Byronic misanthropist”, nor does she “identify with the poet’s misanthropy”. Having lost someone dear to her, she assumes Byron to have had a similar experience (which of course he had, losing Matthews, Wingfield, Edlestone and his mother, all within a few months), and begs him not to retreat into misanthropic gloom. What “Anna” does not want is to meet Byron, still less have sex with him.

The fan letters in the National Library of Scotland do not support McDayter’s thesis about deferred gratification and consequent hysteria, still less its political corollary. Looking at them in detail brings into focus the unreality at the core of her book.

The main criticism of modern pop-fandom (McDayter quotes, with seeming approval, Camille Paglia’s parallel between Byron and Elvis), is that it appeals to an audience devoid of critical faculties, appeals to their herd-instinct and to the power of adolescent peer-group pressure, and squeezes out all originality in the interests of creating a public of consumerist half-wits who can be pumped full of garbage with a view to keeping them culturally passive and politically apathetic. I do not think either “Anna” or “Echo” have been subjected to this kind of steam-rollering. Both have been inspired to write poems – just as Caroline Lamb was inspired to write Glenarvon. McDayter does not want you to know that reading Byron inspired his fans to write poems, which is why she irons “Echo”’s first stanza out into prose. “Echo” wants to meet Byron: “Anna” just wishes him well. Caroline Lamb is the only one of the three diagnosable as a hysteriac, and she is the only one to have known Byron personally. There is, in short, much more individuality and variety in Byron’s fan-club than McDayter’s thesis allows for.

A further part of McDayter’s thesis is about stable identity, and Byron’s threat to the very concept. For Byron inhabits, and invites his readers to inhabit, “the radically democratic space of nonauthoritarian instability” (wherever that may be). Again, Professor McDayter doesn’t spell out exactly what this means in terms of everyday politics, but it stems from Byron’s own refusal to be known and possessed:

For [Nicola] Watson, what this complex layering of identity suggests is that Byron’s fans have come to recognize the poet’s attempts to destabilize his own identity so as to avoid appropriation. 

Byron’s seductive power created a chaotic world of shifting, unstable identities, desire, and masquerade.

What Byron is inspiring is not, however, a form of insanity, but a universal truth:

---

19: Text from National Library of Scotland Acc.12604 folder 105
20: Elvis is indexed under “E”. not under “P”.
21: McDayter p.121.
22: McDayter p.121.
[The fan’s] lack of stable subjectivity is not a symptom of her neurotic aberrance, but rather a reminder of that instability at the heart of all identity.\textsuperscript{24}

It’s here that Professor McDayter’s peripheralisation of Byron’s “more ‘manly’, satiric poetry”\textsuperscript{25} becomes a major handicap. For what does Byron dramatise there, but this very issue? See the Don Juan quotation above, and see this:

\begin{quote}
The more intently the Ghosts gazed the less
Could they distinguish whose the features were –
The devil himself seemed puzzled even to guess –
They varied like a dream – now here, now there –
And several people swore from out the press
They knew him perfectly, and one could swear –
He was his father – upon which another
Was sure he was his mother’s cousin’s brother,

Another that he was a duke – or knight –
An orator – a lawyer – or a priest –
A Nabob – a Man Midwife; but the Wight
Mysterious changed his countenance at least
As oft as they their minds, though in full sight
He stood, the puzzle only was increased –
The Man was a phantasmagoria in
Himself, he was so volatile and thin!\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

The way the peripatetic damned jostle around the inscrutable, pseudonymous, anonymous, unknowable Junius, only to have their scrutiny forever frustrated, is an examination of the very identity issue on which McDayter tries to focus. It’s Byron’s examination of his fans’ voyeurism. But it’s a comical examination, and no-one would know from anything in this book that Byron ever wrote comically, to entertain, and to amuse, and to satirize:

\begin{quote}
I’ve an hypothesis – ’tis quite my own –
I never let it out till now, for fear
Of doing people harm about the throne –
And injuring some minister or peer,
On whom the stigma might perhaps be blown;
It is – My gentle Public, Lend thine ear!
’Tis that what Junius we are wont to call
Was – really, truly – Nobody at all.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

Professor McDayter has neither time nor space for Byron as a humorist. The idea that he might be playing jokes on his readers all the time (and not just in his satires) would bring down the tone of her book, in the way comedy always does: and she is concerned for the weakening status of university intellectuals:

For [Janice] Radway, what drives this insistence upon a rigid distinction between academic study and “middlebrow” consumption is the fact that academics have a personal investment in its maintenance; it is, after all, what enables us to “exert cultural authority over others”. The academy is notoriously reluctant to relinquish its control over what Pierre Bourdieu has famously termed “cultural capital.” I would like to insist that there is a libidinal as well as a cultural economy in the academic maintenance of this great divide. What has been deliberately excised from this discussion is the presence of critical desire in the processes of “serious scholarship.” In order to explain why Paul West has to sound apologetic for liking Byron, we have to understand why thinking and desiring have been so insistently separated.\textsuperscript{28}

I haven’t observed that, in the world outside universities, academics ever exerted any cultural authority, or that they controlled any cultural capital at all – not even Jonathan Bate is that powerful. So whether or not, as a result of Ghislaine McDayter’s arguments, they feel it necessary to descend

\begin{flushright}
25: McDayter p.33.
28: McDayter p.10.
\end{flushright}
into the marketplace and advertise their “critical desire”, will make no difference. In the world of twenty-first century fandom, our cultural gurus will still be Jonathan Ross, Russell Brand, and Rupert Everett.