Byron and Ottoman love: Orientalism, Europeanization and same-sex sexualities in the early nineteenth-century Levant

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Abstract
Byron has been seen as central to a Romantic vision of the Levant, the struggle for Greek independence and an idealization of Greek male love. Yet not much sustained attention has been given to Byron’s same-sex experience with Muslims or to the Ottoman culture of his beloved Greek boys. Byron grasped opportunities for same-sex erotic experience that the Ottoman Empire offered; yet by helping to establish a homogeneous Greek Christian state, he helped magnify the power of the Orthodox clergy that still acts in Greece as a brake on homoeroticism. In helping to Europeanize the Greeks, he helped destroy aspects of the Islamic world that deeply appealed to him. Byron’s Orientalism made him a bridge-builder between East and West; today we should recognize both the patriarchal despotism and the sexual and cultural wealth of the Levant he celebrated and helped destroy.

Keywords
Lord Byron, LGBT, Greece, Islam, nationalism, Romanticism

Particularly in the English-speaking world, Lord Byron (1788–1824) has been seen as central to a Romantic vision of the Levant, the struggle for Greek independence, and (largely long after his death) a defence of homosexuality founded on an idealization of love between men in Greek antiquity. A quarter of a century ago, Louis Crompton’s Byron and Greek Love (1985) contrasted the intense homophobia of Byron’s England with the strong homoerotic strain in his life and writings, particularly during his years in Greece. Yet not much sustained attention has been devoted to the significance of Byron’s same-sex erotic experience in Ottoman Europe with Albanian and Turkish Muslims, or to the largely Ottoman culture of the Greek boys whom Byron loved or had sex with.

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Although the Greek revolt against Turkish rule broke out in 1821, early nineteenth-century Greece, like Ottoman Albania and Asia Minor, can best be understood as a part of the ‘Levant’. This term, less familiar today, was then in common usage to refer to ‘the eastern part of the Mediterranean, with its islands and the countries adjoining’. Historical sources make it clear that as late as 1844 the Greeks were among the peoples that the English considered Levantine; an English writer of the period noted that the modern Greeks ‘naturally follow [Turkish] usages’ (Crompton, 1985: 319). Divided by religion and language, the peoples of the Ottoman realm coexisted under a despotism that recognized their distinctive communities. While Muslims had special privileges, Ottoman subjects shared a culture with Byzantine, Italian and Sephardic Jewish as well as Turkish, Persian and Arabic elements.

The independent Greek state that broke off in the 1820s from the Ottoman Empire retained much of its ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. Many of the new state’s inhabitants were ethnically Albanian, Slavic or Vlach (Romance speakers). Their Greek-derived, Turkish- and Slavic-influenced dialects, now incorporated into modern Greek as part of the nationalist ‘re-creation of language by the State’ (Poulantzas, 1980: 115), were then called Romaine (Romeika), reflecting the Byzantines’ self-image as the Romans of their time. Ethnic identities in the early nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire were still shifting and overlapping.

**Byron’s Orientalism**

The way a British nobleman like Byron viewed Ottoman society was inevitably affected by over a millennium of conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds. The identification with ancient Greece that was growing stronger in early nineteenth-century Europe, particularly among the Romantics, also played a role. Byron was bound to be influenced as well by Western European power in the Eastern Mediterranean, waters that Britain in rivalry with France had ruled from the late seventeenth century; by the early nineteenth century Britain played an increasingly dominant role in the region’s trade. Commercial penetration was beginning to be accompanied by political power. The early nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire was in a much weaker position in relation to Western Europe than it had been when its armies had laid siege to Vienna in 1683; during the Napoleonic wars it suffered French and British incursions and a Russian invasion from the north. It was rapidly becoming the ‘sick man of Europe’, which it remained throughout the nineteenth century.

In Byron’s time, however, the Ottoman lands were still socially and culturally a world apart. The capitalist transformation of their economy and the Europeanization of their politics were barely beginning. Ideologically, the Western European view of Asia as a continent of inferior peoples fated to be ruled by superior Europeans was not yet fully established in the early nineteenth century. While the racial inferiority of Africans had become accepted dogma with the seventeenth-century consolidation of the slave trade, the place of Asians in European racial schemas was not yet fixed.

The Enlightenment, which weakened many European thinkers’ conviction of Christian superiority to other beliefs, had led some of them to admire major non-Christian empires, including not only the Roman but also the Chinese and ancient Egyptian. The linguistic
evidence of the affinity of Indo-European languages, which would provide a supposedly scientific basis for nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideologies of Aryan superiority over Semites and Turks, was not yet complete in Byron’s lifetime. Edward Said notes that eighteenth-century European historians ‘confronted the Orient’s peculiarities with some detachment’, and that the rise of secularism eroded some Europeans’ view of themselves as ‘a community of embattled believers facing barbarian [Islamic] hordes’ (Said, 1979: 117, 120). Edmund Burke, for example, argued that to ‘name a Mahommedan government, is to name a government by law’; the scholar Sir William Jones advocated the study of Asia as giving ‘a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind’ (Sharafuddin, 1996: xxiv, xxvii).

Although the Romantic movement that Byron was part of is often seen as a reaction against the Enlightenment, it was in some ways the Enlightenment’s heir. Byron embodied many of Romanticism’s contradictions, as an aristocrat with democratic sympathies and a martyr to nationalism who saw himself as a cosmopolitan. In his relationship to the Levant, he benefited from the progress made in eighteenth-century Europe in the study of Arabic, Farsi and other languages and literatures of the Islamic world; he had a Farsi grammar on his bookshelves (Blackstone, 1974: 327). He travelled to the Levant not merely as a tourist, but with serious intent ‘to study … Asiatic policy and manners’ (Marchand, 1973a: 175) and make himself ‘a good Oriental scholar’ (Marchand, 1973b: 163). Far from an orthodox Christian, he did not share earlier European contempt for Muslims: he praised the Koran for its poetry. In fact his sympathy for Islam, particularly for Sufi and dervish mysticism, was viewed in his time as ‘eccentric or, at best, picturesque’ (Blackstone, 1974: 325). For him, as for some of his European contemporaries, sympathy for Islam was a personal religious impulse that expressed a desire to break free from inherited Christian dogmas.

Byron did not fully embrace the hierarchical worldview that saw Asian cultures as lesser, and his attitude to the Ottoman world was never one of simple rejection. Rather, it was compounded of fascination born of alienation from his own British society; strong impulses to rebel against the prejudices of his time and culture; delight at Ottoman social and sexual mores; and personal identification with the doom he felt lay ahead both for him and for the Ottomans. Like some late eighteenth-century Europeans before him, Byron was captivated by the sensuality, ‘promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure [and] intense energy’ that he saw in the Levant (Said, 1979: 118). Like the ancient Greek past, the remote Ottoman present gave him spiritual ammunition for his rebellion against the ‘cant, reaction and bigotry’ of bourgeois England (Bloch, 1995, 3: 1010). The Levant was for him a realm of fantasy − ‘With these countries, and events connected with them, all my really poetical feelings begin and end’ (Marchand, 1976a: 45) − as well as a real site of power politics.

Yet taken as a whole, Byron’s attitudes towards Ottoman society, however ambivalent and even appreciative, were Orientalist in Said’s sense. Like other Western Europeans, Byron approached the Levant assuming his own exteriority to it. The ability of prosperous Europeans like him to travel and live there was an expression of their privileged status. Although someone like Byron who came to the Orient for deeply felt personal reasons was more capable than most of a non-stereotyped vision, ultimately he helped from his position of exteriority and privilege to produce an imaginary Orient,
'restructuring' the Orient by his art and making its colors, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs' (Said, 1979: 22). In the end, Ottoman culture was for him less a genuine alternative or influence than a reservoir of 'affinities' or 'flavour' (Blackstone, 1974: 357), which were in the last analysis a sign of its irrationality and thus of the region's need for rational European reorganization.

In opting in the last year of his life for what he perceived to be Greek liberty over Turkish despotism, Byron conceived that liberty as by definition modern and European, exclusively suited to modern Europeans — and thus not to Ottoman Muslims, with whom he fitfully identified but failed to see as autonomous social and political subjects. Despite his ambivalence, or even because of it, he helped shape European Orientalism 'as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said, 1979: 3). Not only his sense of the strangeness of Ottoman culture but even his sympathy for it helped polarize the distinction between East and West and set limits to the human encounter between Romantics and Muslims, between Western and Ottoman Europe.

Ottoman love

Nineteenth-century Ottoman Europe and Asia Minor — including the inhabitants of what is now Greece: Albanian, Turkish and other Muslims and Greek and other Christians — had a rich same-sex sexual life embedded in patriarchal mores, as the scattered but consistent evidence that has come down to us confirms. Havelock Ellis in his Sexual Inversion cited a mid-nineteenth-century German's observation that Albanian men did not always give up boy love even after marriage. Another German source reported that such affairs were 'really sexual, although tempered by idealism'. An earlier French traveller referred to Albanian Ottoman ruler Ali Pasha's 'seraglio of youths' (see Crompton, 1985: 133–5). Byron later described the Turkish baths in Asia Minor as a 'marble paradise of sherbet and sodomy' (Marchand, 1976b: 207).

Nor were the baths on the European side of the Bosporus less notorious. One Ottoman pasha of Salonica (today the Greek city of Thessaloniki) tried to stamp out male prostitution by washers in the city's baths by dismissing all workers under 30 years old, but as soon as the pasha was disgraced and transferred, the young washers returned. As late as 1855 Ottoman troops on route to the Crimean War were frequenting Salonica's bathhouses in search of young boys (Mazower, 2005: 147). They were upholding a well-established military tradition: in 1763 two companies of Ottoman janissaries in Salonica had battled each other for three days in a conflict over a good-looking Jewish boy, until the sultan ordered 40 men from each company to be put to death (Mazower, 2005: 104–5). A French official of Byron's time commented that Albanians were no less 'dissolute' in indulging this 'revolting passion' than the other inhabitants of the region: the practice was general among all classes (Crompton, 1985: 134–5). This included the Greeks: a member of Byron's entourage in Missolonghi in 1823–4 described the Greek chieftains in his army 'parading with formal pomp ... accompanied by their psychouioi (or “soul-sons”)’ (Crompton, 1985: 319).

In short, for Western Europeans in Byron's time the Ottoman lands 'exuded dangerous sex' (Said, 1979: 167). News of the openness of same-sex sexuality in the Ottoman Empire had reached Byron. Among the works on the Levant that he reported reading
before the age of 10 was Sir Paul Ricaut’s *The History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, which reported that the Turks considered their passions for young boys ‘very laudable and vertuous [sic]’ (Ricaut, 1686: 60). Byron’s inquisitiveness about Levantine sexual mores, stimulated by his reading, was among the factors that spurred him to make the first of his two Levantine journeys in 1809–11.

While homosexuality was decriminalized in much of continental Western Europe in the wake of Napoleonic expansion, the last two decades of Byron’s relatively brief life witnessed a crescendo in British repression of same-sex sexuality among males. From 1805 the number of public hangings for ‘sodomy’ increased, with several almost every year in the following decades. Until 1816 even attempted sodomy was punished with public exposure in the pillory, which evoked such violent attacks by the crowds that it often led to blindness, maiming or even a particularly cruel death. Members of the British elite threatened with the harsh sodomy laws, or the disgrace that even strong suspicion could bring, often took refuge in more tolerant France or Italy, but in 1809–11 war closed off that avenue of escape to Byron, while British power in the eastern Mediterranean made the Ottoman Empire available to him as a destination.

The sexualities of Byron’s Britain and the contemporary Ottoman Empire were both shaped by their social formations: they were socially constructed, not ‘in isolation but as part of societ[ies] constantly in (re-) construction’ and ‘linked to gender, class, nation and ethnicity’ (Drucker, 2000: 12). Early nineteenth-century Britain was the world’s leading capitalist country, yet its economic and scientific modernity was accompanied by little that resembled modern homosexuality, let alone by tolerance of it. As in some other European countries, several centuries of urban growth and expanding markets had created the space for underground, commodified transgender subcultures in London and other major cities. However, rising incomes, economic independence and individuals’ detachment from their families of origin had not yet created broader communities of gay men and lesbian women drawn together on the basis of a common identity founded on same-sex desire; such communities, specific to a later stage of capitalist development, began to form only at the end of the nineteenth century.

Byron is not known to have had any contacts with the transgender people he called ‘neutral personage[s]/ Of the third sex’ (Byron, 1986: 248), and there was no wider gay community for him to belong to. His homoerotic bonds with friends and schoolmates were for him an element in a profoundly individual, not to say lonely, sense of sexual identity. The intensification of already harsh repression in post-1805 Britain – an expression of cultural antagonism to the European continent with which Britain was at war, but also typical of many capitalist societies in times of crisis – exacerbated his fears and isolation and his attraction to the freer sexual life of the East.

The Levant in Byron’s time was of course not merely an exotic setting for his fantasies and projects. The Ottoman Empire was the site of sexualities with their own dynamics, histories and ideologies, which were rooted in the broader Ottoman social formation. The same-sex sexualities of Ottoman society, relatively open and integrated into the surrounding culture, were based on traditional, largely pre-Islamic Levantine patterns that were only beginning to be subjected to capitalist economic, social and cultural influences. While condemning ‘sodomy’ (*liwat*) in principle, Ottoman Islam, unlike British Christianity, saw men’s sexual drive as not only natural but in need of immediate
satisfaction — within the parameters of patriarchal power relations. For Western Europeans generally, the prevalence of relatively open male–male eroticism was evidence of Ottoman barbarism, as was often the case with Asian, African and indigenous American societies that Western Europeans conquered or encountered. In the early nineteenth century, however, Ottoman elites were not yet so sensitive to Western European opinion, or so concerned with promoting modern Western Europe family forms, as to alter or conceal their sexual mores.

**Ephebophilia**

The predominant patterns of Ottoman male–male sexuality were ones that historians have classified as transgenerational, in which older males play a sexually active role and younger males a sexually receptive one, without either partner necessarily taking on a distinctive sexual identity. These transgenerational relationships cut across communal divides. Although the Ottoman Empire did not have any secular space and its administrative structures set religious communities apart from one another, the formal supremacy of Islam allowed for much social and sexual interaction, including same-sex interaction, between Muslims, Christians and Jews. Since marriage entailed the segregation of wives and was not founded on romantic love (as it increasingly was among the middle classes of Europe, particularly Protestant northern Europe), privileged Ottomans did not experience their extramarital liaisons as necessarily sources of conflict or pain, as Byron did in Britain.

Against this backdrop, the greater space for male–male sexuality in the Ottoman Empire (compared with Britain) had a strong appeal for Byron. While he was still at Cambridge, according to a list of books he drew up in 1807, he had read the classical Persian poets Sadi and Hafiz, whose work dwells on homoerotic themes. He was also familiar with English homoerotic writers who drew on Orientalist imagery: he described Sir William Beckford’s *Vathek: An Arabian Tale*, published in 1786, as ‘his gospel’. The fact that Beckford had had to flee England in 1784 after being accused of sex with a 16-year-old boy only increased Byron’s sympathy (Crompton, 1985: 115, 118–19). Byron would follow Beckford in projecting his own outlawed desires onto the Levant.

Nor was Byron disappointed by his Levantine experience; the ‘vice … in all its agreeable varieties’ (Marchand, 1973a: 241) in which he indulged there confirmed his sense, as he playfully rhymed, that ‘What men call gallantry, and gods adultery, / Is much more common where the climate’s sultry’ (Byron, 1986: 29). The ‘vices in fashion … in Turkey’ are ‘Sodomy and smoking’, he wrote. ‘They are a sensible people’ (Marchand, 1973a: 222). On meeting the famous Ali Pasha, Byron recorded without dismay the ruler’s admiration for the poet’s ‘small ears, curling hair, & little white hands’, although neither of the two seems to have been interested in sexual relationships with adult males. Byron had not counted on ‘playing the part of young Caesar in Bithynia’ (playing a receptive role in male sex). For his part, Byron described Albanian men as ‘the most beautiful race … in the world’ and Ali’s grandsons as ‘the prettiest little animals I ever saw’ (Marchand, 1973a: 227–8). He was also flattered later by the attentions of Ali Pasha’s son Veli Pasha, the Ottoman ruler of the Peloponnese, though a bit embarrassed when the young ruler threw his arm around Byron’s waist, squeezed his hand, and called
him a ‘beautiful boy’ (Marchand, 1973b: 10). Crompton suggests that Byron’s poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, composed in part during his Albanian stay, showed that ‘he had been meditating on English severity at the same time he was observing Albanian manners’ (Crompton, 1985: 139). Two lines of the poem, deleted before publication, described the ‘shameless torch of wild desire … lit’ for Ali Pasha’s ‘boyish minions of unhallowed love’ (Byron, 1980b: 63).

Not only were Ottoman rulers generally far less repressive than the British of sex between males, Byron as a Western European aristocrat enjoyed particular sexual freedom in Ottoman territory. Like many other aspects of life, sexual conduct was not directly regulated in the Ottoman Empire by state officials, but rather fell under the *millets* (official religious communities) in which religious authorities had jurisdiction over their co-religionists. Greek Orthodox Christians, for example, fell under the Rum millet; there were separate *millets* for Jews and Armenians. Western Europeans (‘Franks’) fell under none of these *millets*, however, and were thus virtually exempt from official control of their sexual conduct as well as much of their day-to-day business. In the course of the nineteenth century Western European powers would extract ‘capitulations’ from the Ottoman authorities that increasingly exempted their citizens from Ottoman law.

Byron thus had great freedom to enjoy the homoeroticism he encountered in the Levant. While there is no evidence that he had sexual encounters with Muslim males, his appreciation of Ottoman sexual mores is unmistakable. However, his understanding of them, or even of his own sexuality, is more obscure. Invaluable as Crompton’s *Byron and Greek Love* is, it uses the word ‘homosexual’ indiscriminately and with little reflection, although Crompton admits that the word ‘would have puzzled Byron’s contemporaries’. So would the word ‘bisexual’, the label that Crompton applies to Byron after concluding that Byron’s heterosexual impulses were as genuine as his homosexual ones (Crompton, 1985: 11, 8).

Today, after two or three decades of theoretical reflection on these issues, we may wonder whether a word like ‘libertine’, which Byron would have been familiar with, is equally or more useful than ‘bisexual’ in understanding his life and loves. Crompton himself writes of Byron’s ‘rational libertinism’, mixed though it was with a heavy dose of guilt. Same-sex sexuality was commonly viewed in Byron’s time (and in preceding centuries in Western Europe) less as a separate orientation than as one form of unbridled lust: in Crompton’s words, as ‘the resource of jaded appetites’ (1985: 216, 232). This was in keeping with the biggest scandal associated with Byron in his own time – his sexual affair with his half-sister Augusta.

In using the term ‘Greek love’, Crompton is borrowing a phrase that *would* have been intelligible to Byron’s English contemporaries and would have had ‘resonant historical and literary associations’ (Crompton, 1985: 11). But what associations? Byron’s English contemporaries were rarely willing even to publish accurate English translations of ancient Greek texts that discussed or mentioned same-sex sexual relations, let alone to seriously study ancient Greek sexuality. Upper-class, classically educated Englishmen realized that the ancient Greeks did not share their own time’s across-the-board rejection of same-sex sexual desire and behaviour as sinful, but that seems to be about as far as their understanding reached. This is not terribly useful in helping us analyse how Byron applied or misapplied his ancient Greek or Persian reading during his Levantine travels.
Clearly ‘Greek love’ was often a synonym for ‘pederasty’. Since Byron seems not to have been attracted to pre-pubescent boys, the more accurate term would be ephebophilia: sexual desire for post-pubescent males whose secondary sexual characteristics are not yet fully developed (youths ‘slight and slim, / Blushing and beardless’ (Byron, 1986: 47)). ‘When boyish blood is mantling, who can ‘scape / The fascination of thy magic gaze?’, he asked (Byron, 1980b: 33), and rhapsodized, ‘sweeter … than all / Is first and passionate love’ (Byron, 1986: 49). The three males whom Byron loved most or had the strongest sexual attachments to – John Edlestone, Nicolas Giraud and Lukas Chalandrutsanos – were all 15 when the attachments began (Crompton, 1985: 237–8). In this respect his passion would not have surprised the ancient Greeks, and it was not strange to the Greeks or other Ottoman peoples of Byron’s own time. He in his turn found Levantine adolescents very attractive: ‘These few short years [between 13 and 16] make wondrous alterations’, he wrote, ‘Particularly amongst sun-burnt nations’ (Byron, 1986: 31).

The love of youths that Byron craved did not quite correspond to what he found in the Levant, however. The ancient Greeks’ ephebophilia was distinctive in the emphasis they placed (at least in Athens and a number of other city-states, and only among citizens) on the educational function of an older lover’s passion for his young beloved. Byron embraced the role of the older lover as mentor, and combined it with a sort of chivalry – though definitely not a chaste chivalry – suited to his own position as a British nobleman. He felt a particular tenderness for youths like John Edlestone, whose vulnerability may have reminded him of his own childhood with his widowed mother in remote Aberdeen, before he became the heir to a peerage. Although the disability that affected his foot did not prevent his becoming a sexual icon or accomplishing athletic feats like mountain climbing and swimming the Hellespont, his internalization of others’ perceptions of him as ‘lame’ – he wrote of his ‘bodily inferiority’ (Marchand, 1973b: 47) – may have contributed to his response as an adult to neediness in adolescents.

Whatever the reason, Byron saw his love of youths as a tender passion, and he wanted his young male beloveds to return his devotion with passion, gratitude and deep respect. In the Romantic worldview that he helped disseminate in Europe and especially Britain, a beloved should be ready to lay down his life for his lover, as he describes the beautiful Greek youth Antinous dying for his lover, the Roman emperor Hadrian (Byron, 1980b: 190). For Byron, love made sexuality spiritual; it was ‘by Alla given, / To lift from earth our low desire’ (Byron, 1981: 75). Like the Romantics in general he conceived love as a ‘boundless giving of oneself … as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality’ (Weber, 1998: 347). In short, as one of Byron’s highest ideals, love was for him a form of rebellion against the gathering triumph of a civilization founded on calculating self-interest.

Byron’s conception of love as wholly free of every practical consideration had roots going back to the medieval courtly love tradition, which in turn had roots in Arabic erotic poetry in praise of boys. Romantic love as Byron sang it, however, was as typical of the Western European bourgeois nineteenth century as the calculating rationality against which it was a rebellion. Most other societies have been less rigid in opposing desire to practicality. In particular, the Albanian, Turkish and Greek men and boys whose virile, dashing good looks Byron so admired – perhaps another reflection of an insecurity stemming from his childhood or his disability – were not always selfless in
responding to his advances, and rarely seem to have fully reciprocated his tenderness. In Ottoman sexual culture, while attractive boys might be expected – or forced – in certain circumstances to be sexually receptive, they did not tend to see their sexual roles as preparing them either for citizenship or for service as devoted pages to Byronic knights-errant.

Byron was thus unlucky in some respects in his search for love in the Levant. There is evidence that he had an intense sexual relationship in 1811 with Nicolas Giraud (a French youth born and living in Greece), even when they were both seriously ill on their travels together. Their light-hearted affair may have been a relief from the sentimentality and guilt that dogged Byron’s English liaisons. Giraud’s statement that he and Byron would ‘die together’ (Marchand, 1973b: 12), and a yearning letter to Byron years after they parted, suggest that Giraud did feel affection for him, although it is not clear that Giraud’s love fully satisfied Byron.

Byron’s last passion, for Lukas Chalandrutsanos during his second Levantine journey in 1823–4, was far less satisfactory. Apparently the handsome Chalandrutsanos, far from being in love with Byron, did not even have sex with him, though he accepted Byron’s admiration, money and patronage. In his poem Last Words on Greece Byron called his love for Chalandrutsanos as a ‘maddening fascination’ (Byron, 1993: 83); it seems to have been ‘fired rather than extinguished by the boy’s disdain’ (Crompton, 1985: 328). It was his ‘lot’, he wrote, ‘To strongly – wrongly – vainly – love thee still’ (Byron, 1993: 82). If Byron experienced the disappointment of a sentimental sexual tourist on whom it dawns that he is loved for his money and privilege but not for himself, he would not be the last to do so. Although he died in Missolonghi while Chalandrutsanos was there, it was John Edlestone’s cornelian ring that Byron was wearing.

Byron was conscious that the Greek youths he met in the Levant fell short of ancient Greek ideals of male love as he interpreted them. He seems to have attributed the difference to the decadence of the modern Greeks under Ottoman rule. In fact, Byron compared the Greeks unfavourably to the Albanians and Turks – though beautiful, Greeks have ‘all the Turkish vices without their courage’, he complained (Marchand, 1973a: 238) – while hoping that the Greeks ‘will … be better’ (Byron, 1980b: 201) once freedom ‘converted the Slave into a sober Citizen’ (Marchand, 1981: 33). Complaining in 1810 of the fickleness of the Greek boy Eustathius Georgiou, a ‘child … as forward as an unbroken colt’, he cited approvingly the dismissive comment of a janissary who said that Georgiou ‘was too true a Greek not to be disagreeable’ (Marchand, 1973b: 6–7).

**Greek liberty, Christian repression**

Many Romantic Philhellenes shared Byron’s impatience with modern Greeks, whom they sometimes dismissed as degenerate, Byzantinized Slavs. Byron’s assessments of the Turks tended to be more favourable, such as when he wrote in 1811, ‘I have seen mankind in various Countries and find them equally despicable, if anything the Balance is rather in favour of the Turks’ (Marchand, 1973b: 47). His estranged wife would later recall, ‘He preferred the Turkish opinions, manners and dress in all respects to ours’ (Blackstone, 1974: 356).
Byron’s often disparaging comments about the modern Greeks and his often admiring ones about Turks make his decision in 1823 to risk his life in the Greek revolt against the Ottomans even more remarkable. There were various reasons for it. One was world-weariness; while in Greece, he wrote, ‘If thou regret’st thy youth, why live? / Seek out … / A soldier’s grave’ (Byron, 1993: 81). Thirst for glory and fame paid a part. Byron realized that his celebrity would be an asset to the embattled rebels.

There were deeper political reasons as well. Byron felt a lifelong sympathy for the underdog, the ‘lower world’ he felt called on to champion in politics (Byron, 1986: 616), such as when he defended the machine-breaking Luddites in the House of Lords. His circle of radical, irreligious Romantics (notably including Shelley) sympathized in general with rebellions against the tyrannies that ruled most of Europe in the 1820s. Byron’s support for the Greek revolt was in line with their sympathies for earlier uprisings in 1820–1 in Spain, Portugal, the kingdom of Naples and Austrian-ruled Italy. ‘One common cause makes myriads of one breast’, Byron wrote: Greek ‘Slaves of the East, or Helots of the West’ (Byron, 1993: 9).

Certainly nothing in the despotic Ottoman political system was calculated to appeal to Byron and his radical friends. Flattered as he was by Ali Pasha’s attentions, for example, Byron dismissed the pasha as ‘a remorseless tyrant, guilty of the most horrible cruelties’, whose rule was ‘lawless law’ over subjects ‘treated like slaves’ (Marchand, 1973a: 228) – including his seraglio of boys. In general, Byron wrote, ‘It makes my blood boil … / To see men let these scoundrel sovereigns break law’ (Byron, 1986: 616). Ali may have incarnated for Byron the masculine ‘virtues that come from absolutism − dignity, confidence, generosity, courage’ (Sharrafuddin, 1996: 250) − but clearly Byron’s experience did not bear out Burke’s argument that Islamic government was a form of the rule of law.

With the outbreak of the uprising, many Romantic Philhellenes’ hatred of tyranny fused with their passion for Greek antiquity: Shelley declared, ‘We are all Greeks’ (Shelley, 1851: 189). This specifically Greek element mattered less to the Orientalist Byron. He had commented in a note to Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (1812), ‘To talk, as the Greeks themselves do, of their rising again to their pristine superiority, would be ridiculous’ (Byron, 1980b: 202). His policy in the revolt confirmed his freedom from ethnic partiality. One of his practical contributions, for example, was to recruit Albanian-speaking Souli warriors for the rebel forces – though he later complained in his Song of the Suliotes of their lust for loot, sexual conquest and glory: ‘There is booty, there is Beauty − / … There is Glory − there is plunder − / Then away despite of thunder’ (Byron, 1993: 78–9). Most were eventually discharged.

Byron’s support for Greek freedom had in fact been nuanced, qualified and even sceptical. Although he had called to Greece in Childe Harold, ‘Who now shall lead thy scatter’d children forth, / And long accustom’d bondage uncreate?’, he commented in a note, ‘The Greeks will never be independent … and God forbid they ever should!’ (Byron, 1980b: 68, 201). In his Don Juan (1821) it was only an opportunistic, ‘sad trimmer’ of a poet who, to flatter his audience, ‘dreamed that Greece might still be free’, and called, ‘Earth! render back from out thy breast / A remnant of our Spartan dead … / To make a new Thermopylae’ (the battle where the ancient Greeks defeated the Persians) (Byron, 1986: 187–90).
When the revolt broke out, however, Byron apparently hoped that freedom from Ottoman tyranny combined with Philhellene tutelage would allow the Greeks to create something approximating a modern European state – however unlikely a foundation for such hopes was offered by a congeries of southern Balkan Christian chieftains, eventually and grudgingly patronized by conservative Western European monarchies. He conceived Greek liberty in any case in European terms, as the constitutional rule of law, not as the antique free polis in which ephebophilia had flourished.

Culturally as well as politically, many Philhellenes hoped that independent modern Greece would return to abandoned ancient Greek ideals. Perhaps in Byron’s optimistic moments he hoped that free Greeks would have sympathy for ancient Greek sexual ideals: referring to a renowned Athenian male lover and foe of tyranny, he wrote: ‘The Athenian wears again Harmodius’ sword’ (Byron, 1993: 9). More likely, judging by Byron’s writings, he feared that Ottoman ephebophilia was too tainted by ‘lawless law’ – coercion and even rape – to survive in a modern polity, and that sexual renunciation would be one price of Greek nationhood. In helping to de-Orientalize the Greeks, he was in fact helping to eliminate the last remnants of ancient Greek ephebophilia from the Levant – as he may even have been dimly aware. Thinking of his unrequited love for Lukas Chalandrutsanos, he abjured himself: ‘Tread those reviving passions down / … up to the Field [of battle]!’ (Byron, 1993: 80−1).

Whatever his reasons, Byron’s decision to join the Greek revolt brought him to the southern Balkans at a watershed in their modern history. His participation helped make the rebellion the favourite cause of the European left, comparable in the fervour it inspired to the Spanish Republic in 1936−9. Many of the Western European volunteers who came to Greece in 1823−4 were drawn by his poetry and fame. His death there in April 1824 made him ‘the hero he would never have been if he had lived’; by his death he ‘unwittingly paid a part in [making] nationalism’ (in place of religion) the ‘most divisive and destructive element’ in European culture (St Clair, 1972: 183−4). His death also helped fuel support for European intervention, which would save the rebels from defeat.

Byron thus actively contributed to the establishment of a religiously homogeneous Greek Christian state in what had for centuries been a religiously and ethnically diverse region of the Ottoman Empire. The revolt that he helped sustain, while it produced only a relatively small Greek kingdom in the extreme south of the Balkans, was the founding violence that began the creation of a homogeneous Greece purged of many aspects of its prior Ottoman culture.

The creation of modern Greece, dependent from the start on Western European intervention, was in many ways a colonial enterprise. Besides Byron’s low regard for the modern Greeks, he shared other Western Europeans’ essentially colonial attitude towards them. The ‘interposition of foreigners alone can emancipate the Greeks’, he wrote in 1812; with foreign aid he saw ‘no very great obstacle … to their becoming an useful dependency, or even a free state, with a proper guarantee’ – though ‘many and well-informed men doubt the practicability even of this’ (Byron, 1980b: 202). Hostile to tsarist Russia, the bugbear of the nineteenth-century European left, he rejected Russian sponsorship of the Greek cause – ‘Better still serve the haughty Mussulman’ (Byron, 1993: 10), he wrote – and doubted that even the French he admired would help: ‘Will Gaul or
Muscovite redress ye? no!’ (Byron, 1980b: 69). Once the uprising began, however, he was less wary of public or even official British support and guidance.

The ‘idea of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia’ was part and parcel of Romantic Orientalism (Said, 1979: 154); and European Romanticism played a decisive role in transforming a southern Balkan Christian uprising, initially impelled by economic and religious grievances, into a project to create a modern Greek nation. Western European Romantic Philhellenes were crucial in ensuring the success of the neo-Hellenic Enlightenment that began in the late eighteenth century, mostly in Greek communities in Western Europe, but which initially found little response among the Greeks under Ottoman rule. A major role was played by Greeks in the Ionian Islands, former Venetian possessions occupied by France in the Napoleonic wars and then ruled by Britain until they were ceded to Greece in 1864; Byron prepared his own intervention in the Greek revolt from the British Ionian island of Kefallonia (Cephalonia). As part of their British colonial modernization, the islands were given ancient Greek names, a currency with the ancient Greek name ‘obol’, and schools and a university that celebrated ancient Greece (St Clair, 1972: 21–2). The demand for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire became popular only by tapping into ‘an underlying desire for Europeanization’ (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 17). Culturally this meant that Greece had to be ‘de-Orientalized’.

During Byron’s few months in Greece in 1823–4, he proved himself a pragmatic exponent of Europeanizing intervention. While other Philhellenes sympathized with swashbuckling military chieftains, Byron described the Europeanized leader Alexander Mavrocordatos as ‘the only civilized person … amongst the liberators’ (Marchand, 1981: 22–3). Even more telling, he cooperated with the British Resident of Kefallonia, Charles James Napier, later the conqueror of the Indian (now Pakistani) province of Sind, who ‘boasted that if he were put in command of a Greek force the gallows would be his most effective weapon’ (St Clair, 1972: 167–8).

Said points out that Byron’s sense of the Levant’s beauty and erotic and spiritual power – his view of ‘the Orient [as] a form of release, a place of original opportunity’ and ‘inhuman beauty’ – was linked to the down-to-earth realism of the European intervention Byron practised there, based on his ‘political vision of the Near Orient and … very combative awareness of how relations between the Orient and Europe would have to be conducted’ (Said, 1979: 167, 192). In the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries this dual Romantic attitude towards Greece would feed a syndrome of cultural schizophrenia, dividing Greeks’ loyalties between the idealized classical past that defines their modern nationalism and their ‘lived, Romaic culture carrying in it remnants of a fading cultural memory of Ottomanism’ (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 40). It was the Romaic culture in which Byron’s same-sex loves were rooted. Politically he rejected the exotic culture that appealed to him erotically. His abstract choice for liberty and Greece entailed denigrating a Levantine reality that ‘had proved itself on his pulses as a way of life’ (Blackstone, 1974: 330–1).

Of course Byron never saw, and could hardly have imagined, the ultimate transformation of the Levant that he helped set in motion. The independent Greek state whose birth he helped to bring about had a relationship to Western Europe that was not terribly different from that of the Ottoman state it split off from: it underwent Western European commercial and political penetration, but was only gradually beginning to become
capitalist and acquire a correspondingly ‘European’ culture.\textsuperscript{11} The villages of independent Greece were still far from being incorporated into a homogenized space structured around a marketplace of labour and goods. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Greek Christian forces in the 1820s was still not seen as a threat to the resurgent nation, perhaps because ‘the contours of what it meant to be Greek … were still fairly rudimentary’ (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 49).

Modern Greece would nonetheless be consolidated as an overwhelmingly Eastern Orthodox Christian nation, despite the fixation of Romantic Philhellenes like Byron on its antique pagan roots and despite the initial suspicion towards the Greek national project of the Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul. The process began in Byron’s lifetime, when Bishop Germanos of Old Patras (across the Corinthian Gulf from Byron’s Greek base in Missolonghi) helped raise the banner of revolt in the Aghia Lavra monastery on 25 March 1821. By the mid nineteenth century Greece would be conceived as a ‘Hellenochristian civilization’ (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 53, 55).\textsuperscript{12} The political power of the Orthodox clergy acts to this day as a brake on the development of an openly homoerotic life in Greece. Ironically, at least for privileged men, Greece under Turkey was ‘in sexual matters, freer than liberated Greece was to be’ (Crompton, 1985: 336).

Besides being sexually repressive, the modern Greek national state would be linguistically uniform and religiously intolerant: another irony, given Byron’s interest in Middle Eastern literatures and his sympathy for Islam. The Greek revolt gave birth to a nation obsessed with the dangers posed by the presence of minorities on its territory. For all the diversity of the new state’s population, and despite Byron’s cynical observation that in Greece ‘religions take their turn’ (Byron, 1980b: 45), Greekness was defined from the beginning to exclude Muslims. When the revolt broke out, one-ninth of the population of the Peloponnese consisted of Turkish Muslims, many of whom had lived there for centuries and no longer spoke Turkish. Before Byron arrived in Greece most were killed or driven out: 20,000 of them died in a few weeks in the spring of 1821. The violence continued until ‘there were no more Turks to kill’ (St Clair, 1972: 1–2, 12). By the time Greece’s independence was recognized in 1829, the Muslims who had lived on its territory had either died or fled to Ottoman-held territory, ‘some out of fear, some because their properties or communities had been destroyed during the war, and some responding to pressure or force’ (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 145–6). Jews, who generally favoured the Ottomans, were also treated as enemies; the rebels who took Tripolitsa in October 1821 ‘systematically tortured’ its Jews (St Clair, 1972: 45).

Byron anticipated this violence in 1811 when he translated a Greek war song calling to attack ‘the foe / Till their hated blood shall flow / In a river past our feet’ (Byron, 1980a: 331), and in 1812 when he warned that once armed resistance became possible in Greece, ‘Heaven have mercy on the Ottomans’ (Byron, 1980b: 202). But he could hardly have foreseen how brutal the violence would be. Western European nationalism in his time was largely a middle-class affair, which did not impinge much on peasants and plebeians, and nationalist uprisings did not inspire peasants and plebeians to slaughter one another. The ethno-religious cleansing and killings in the Greek revolt had more precedent in mediaeval history than in European nationalism of the time. In taking Salonica in 1430, for example, the Ottomans had punished its Greek inhabitants for their (largely reluctant) resistance by massively killing, plundering and enslaving
them – almost as brutally as Crusaders had butchered Muslims for a few centuries in Palestine – in a few months transforming a Greek-majority city to one with only a small Greek minority. The Ottomans responded to the Christian violence of the 1821 revolt with indiscriminate anti-Christian violence, executing the Orthodox Patriarch and other Greeks who had not supported the revolt at all.

Yet the slaughter that accompanied the uprising was not an expression of pre-modern barbarism that would end with the Europeanization of modern Greece. As capitalism expanded, it changed the reality, meaning and relationship to the state of territory and historicity. The emerging capitalist state unified and homogenized its land, for example, by organizing it into the working space of its army, police, prisons, bureaucracy and schools; it transformed historical memory by turning history into ‘the forward course of the nation’ and wiping out signs of other peoples’ pasts. Violence was often part of the process: genocide is a modern ‘form of extermination specific to the … cleaning up of the national territory by means of homogenizing enclosure’, expelling ‘“foreign bodies” … beyond space and time’ (Poulantzas, 1980: 113, 107, 114).

In the case of the emerging Balkan states, the religious massacres of the 1820s were a foretaste of the steady exodus of Muslims from the Balkans in the wake of nineteenth-century Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian expansion, the involuntary ‘exchange of populations’ between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, and, more recently, the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia in the early 1990s. While one genealogy of the Greek massacres of the 1820s links them to the religious wars of earlier centuries, another connects them to twentieth-century genocides.

Byron deplored at least some of what little he saw of these developments. He tried in any event to uphold a minimum of humanity. Before his arrival in Greece both the Greeks and Turks routinely killed enemy prisoners; at Missolonghi he freed first four and then another 28 Turkish prisoners and sent them with a letter to the Turkish governor of Patras asking for similar mercy for Greek prisoners. Nor was he insensitive to the havoc wrought when ‘Death [was] drunk with gore’ (Byron, 1986: 398), or to the human and cultural tragedies that Ottoman decline led to. His account in his poem Don Juan of the recent Russian invasion describes the resulting plight of a ‘Moslem orphan … homeless, houseless, helpless’ whose ‘very place of birth was but a spectre / Of what it had been; there the muezzin’s call / To prayer was heard no more’ (Byron, 1986: 407−8). In his last weeks he expressed his compassion for the revolt’s Muslim victims by taking tender care of the eight- or nine-year-old Turkish girl Hatadjé Aga, a refugee from the 1821 massacres. Byron’s experiences in the revolt probably did not make him optimistic about Greece’s future. ‘I believed myself on a fool’s errand from the outset’, he wrote in Kefallonia, and again, ‘I was a fool to come here’ (Marchand, 1981: 20, 43). Among his last reported words were, ‘Poor Greece’ (St Clair, 1972: 180).

**Beyond Orientalism**

Not modern Greece but Greek antiquity and the Islamic Levant were the destinations Byron yearned for when his Romantic ‘soul ardently desire[d] to go home again’ (Löwy and Sayre, 2001: 22). Yet perhaps he would have chosen to join the Greek uprising even if he had known how little modern Greece would resemble the ancient Greece of his ideals or welcome his Levantine sexual or cultural tastes. Unlike his radical Romantic
friends, he had little faith in humanity’s Promethean capacity to shape its future. He was convinced that he was ineluctably fulfilling his destiny, going to a doom ‘written on my brow’ (Byron, 1981: 73).

Yet modern gay freedom as it is lived in Europe today, and particularly the disdain it increasingly inspires towards the Islamic world, might have appealed almost as little to Byron as British contempt for Ottoman mores did in his own time. In the space of a decade or two, the place of sexuality in the hegemonic European view of the Islamic world has been virtually flipped upside-down. Europeans once saw North Africa and the Middle East as sites of escape from European constraints (as cities like Tangiers and Tunis are even today for gay European tourists); today they see modern Europe as a bearer of sexual enlightenment in contrast to an Islamic world seen as benighted and backward. Admittedly the Islamic world too has changed, with the imposition of hetero-normative sexualities as part of nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalist modernization; for example, erotic poetry focusing on youths or men ‘disappeared completely as a poetic genre’ from Arabic literature around the late nineteenth century (Massad, 2007: 35). Nevertheless, the current European ideological prism seriously distorts the interpretation of Arab sexualities and does no justice to the historical ‘variety, distribution, and longevity of same-sex patterns in Islamic societies’ (Roscoe and Murray, 1997: 4–6). Clearly it makes no sense of the sexual repression that nationalism and Europeanization brought to the former Ottoman Europe.

The story of Byron’s journey of sexual discovery in Ottoman Europe − both the dreams that came true for him and the ones that did not − can help challenge this present-day but still implicitly colonial ideology. His Levantine encounters and reflections make clear that what is often portrayed as a rediscovery of Europe’s classic sexual past was in fact an interaction between Western and Ottoman Europe and between Romantic and Islamic cultures. Despite the limitations imposed by his Orientalist mindset, Byron’s ambivalent attitudes towards Islam, Turks, Albanians and Greeks made him in some ways a misunderstood ‘bridge-builder, linking East and West’ (Blackstone, 1974: 361), whose Eurocentrism was at odds with his desire to be ‘a citizen of the world’ (Marchand, 1973a: 248). By retelling his story in a critical spirit, we should be able to recognize both the despotic, patriarchal dynamics and the sexual and cultural wealth of the Levant he encountered and celebrated. In this way we can move beyond both the Orientalism that clouded his view of it and the Europeanizing nationalism that would destroy it.

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Notes

1 The majority of the population of Ottoman Salonica from the mid fifteenth to the early twentieth century was Jewish.
2 Thanks to Özlem Barin for this point.
3 Blackstone makes this point (1974: 346).
4 As John Lauritsen points out (2008), given the posthumous destruction of Byron’s memoirs and other personal documents, lack of evidence is no proof that such encounters did not take place.
5 Crompton (1985: 162) even applies to the England of 1811 Kinsey’s much-cited statistic that 10 per cent of any male human population can be assumed to consist of ‘homosexuals’, although the Kinsey report was based entirely on a US sample and even for this sample gave a wide range of different percentages based on different criteria.
6 Crompton (1985: 89–91) points out, for example, that there were in Byron’s time no English translations of Plato’s Symposium or Pheadrus that honestly rendered those works’ discussions of male love, although he does give an account (e.g. pp. 49–51) of Jeremy Bentham’s unpublished attempts to analyse ancient Greek and Roman same-sex sexualities.
7 Foucault (1990: 223) stresses the ‘admiration, gratitude, or affection’ that boys were supposed to feel for their ancient Greek lovers, though he questions whether the Greeks’ privileging of ephebophilia was due ‘solely to … pedagogical concerns’ (1990: 195). For the origins of this pattern, see Percy (1996).
8 In antiquity Antinous’ drowning was widely considered an accident.
9 ‘Courtly Love … resembles the love celebrated by Arab poets, who were mostly homosexual, as were a number of the troubadours’, notably the late ninth-century Arab troubadour Ibn Dâvoud, who celebrated a love of youths ‘that was veiled and secret, chaste and burning, delicious torment and incurable ailment, a beneficent passion which blossomed in death’ (De Rougement, 1983: 121, 361). Boswell (1980: 258) notes the consensus that Islamic literary traditions from Spain influenced Provençal courtly poetry, and observes, ‘In Islamic Sufi literature homosexual eroticism was a major metaphorical expression of the spiritual relationship between God and man’ (1980: 27).
10 Byron reported to one correspondent that he nearly died while having sex during this trip, and to another that he had ‘obtained above two hundred pl & opt Cs’ (Marchand, 1975: 26−7, 23) – an expression decoded only in 1957 as meaning sex to the point of orgasm (Crompton, 1985: 128, 153).
11 The Greek Phanariots who played a central role in the Ottoman Empire’s shipping and economic life and a significant role in its administration persisted in sympathizing with a multiethnic Ottomanist ideology that Greek nationalists rejected. Most Phanariots lived outside the territory of newly independent Greece; the name ‘Phanariot’ derives from the Istanbul neighbourhood Fener (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 38, 52).
12 Every Greek constitution until 1975 required the head of state to be a Greek Orthodox Christian and swear to protect the Orthodox faith (Özkırımlı and Sofos, 2008: 55).
13 More than half a million Muslim refugees left former Ottoman territories between 1876 and 1879 alone (Mazower, 2005: 178).
14 A chivalrous impulse to protect Muslim women and girls was a recurrent motif of Byron’s Orientalism − as it has been in imperial projects generally in the Islamic world (e.g. in Afghanistan today).

References


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