

**Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 312. £65. ISBN 9781107082595.**

Five years ago I was fortunate enough to visit the library at Ravenna and there view, in a petri dish, pieces of sunburnt skin that Theresa Guiccioli had peeled from Lord Byron's back. Staring at these nearly two-hundred-year-old chips and flecks, the archivist and I had a conversation about why a person *would* peel and save sunburnt skin from her lover's back. What did it say about Guiccioli's vision of Byron? Did she conceive of him as a celebrity as well as a lover? Had his fame transformed him into a quasi-religious icon in her eyes?

Clara Tuite's *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* seeks to elucidate the mystery not just of Byron's celebrity but also of a broader kind of fame peculiarly new to the Romantic period and manifest most clearly in the poet: a negative celebrity more akin to notoriety. Tuite argues that this 'scandalous celebrity', which 'reconfigures the distinction between crime and scandal' (xxv), is a direct precursor of contemporary celebrity, which is so often predicated on a kind of delicious horror.

Taking Byron as its jumping-off point, the book offers a prismatic examination of this fame. To do so, it splits itself into three sections. The first, 'Worldlings,' uses four figures who were both celebrities in their own right and connected to Byron – Caroline Lamb, Stendhal, Napoleon, and Viscount Castlereagh – to examine the ways in which the scandalous associations of those linked to him contributed to Byron's own negative celebrity. The second, 'Writings,' considers the links between Byron's works and his notoriety, and the uses he makes of his scandalous celebrity (or at least his various scandals) in those works. The third section, 'Afterwarriors,' looks at the way in which Byron and his works were used by others to symbolize radicalism and liberty – whether figured positively or negatively.

Though all of the sections offer much food for thought, the second is certainly the strongest. It finds interesting links between *Childe Harold IV* and Byron's celebrity in particular, noting the way the canto connects to Byron's own 'pageant of his bleeding heart', the personal miseries and scandals he carried on his back across Europe. Tuite is very good on the power of what we would now call 'owning' one's actions, drawing attention to the ways in which Byron's willingness to acknowledge and exploit his notoriety helped him create a more powerful celebrity. The chapter on *Don Juan* is also very fine, although differently so, musing on the poem's uses of ambiguity and possibility to present 'scandalous' new ways of thinking. Here readers see the power of another kind of owning: what happens when scandalous meaning is disseminated by others.

The other two sections of the book are good as well, but they are bedevilled by vagueness. Although Tuite takes care to state her thesis clearly at the beginning of her chapters, they wander far afield, and it is seldom clear how their explorations and assertions link to that thesis. Readers may wish for more guidance as they proceed, particularly since these chapters are stuffed full of valuable facts and connections that would gain weight from a little more clear cohesion.

One thing these two sections do make abundantly clear, however – and in this Tuite makes an enormous contribution to Byron studies – is that Lord Byron could be a very unpleasant man. The book discusses both his truly cruel 'joke' of sending a lock of Lady Oxford's hair to Caroline Lamb as a love token, and his solipsistic decision to air in public dirty linen that was, after all, half his wife's. It is worth being reminded that charismatic poets are just people, too – not least because it complicates conceptions about both charisma and poets.

The book also suffers from a tic not uncommon to deeply intellectual studies: it welcomes only the sort of readers who already speak its language. If you don't know what Byron's 'libertine prerogative' might be (I didn't), if you are suspicious about the concept of

the 'economy of desire', or if you have difficulty unpacking sentences such as 'The moment of Byron's scandalous celebrity coincides with the historical emergence of the literary-aesthetic sphere as a site of mediation' (240), this book will not enlighten you. It's a shame that a work of such richness and significance thus cuts itself off from a good portion of its potential readership. That being said, though, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* repays the careful reading it requires, and it deserves to be a central text in both Celebrity Studies and Byron Studies.

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