

**Geoffrey Bond and Christine Kenyon Jones, *Dangerous to Show: Byron and His Portraits*. London: Unicorn, 2020. Pp. 158. £25. ISBN 9781912690718.**

This ambitious and richly-illustrated volume introduces the reader to the diverse scope of Lord Byron's self-fashioning and posthumous reinterpretation through portraiture. By focusing on a broad range of depictions of George Gordon, 6<sup>th</sup> Baron Byron (1788-1824) produced during and after his lifetime, the authors shed light upon how this Romantic poet was, and wanted to be, perceived. Presented in chronological order and incorporating reproductions of printed, painted and sculpted artworks, this accessible and wide-ranging study will appeal to specialists of literature and art history as well as the informed general reader.

Described as 'what we would now call a celebrity' (9), Byron was the ideal candidate for a portrait. His aristocratic background and foreign travels, as well as his poetry, provided ample inspiration for artists from the eighteenth century onwards, although his earliest likenesses are less well known. They include a diminutive watercolour of 1795 by the Edinburgh artist William Kay which presents Byron as a long-haired child clutching a bow and arrow. Invoking the classical iconography of Cupid, this modest painting also marks the moment when the sitter became heir presumptive to the barony of Byron. Other intriguing early portraits, executed by neighbours of the young Byron in 1806-7, include an ink silhouette of his face and a 2cm-wide watercolour of his right eye. The eye portrait, painted by Elizabeth Pigot, was a token of affection, intended to be worn in a locket, and thus more intimate an image than many of the later commissioned likenesses. She also depicted Byron in a series of watercolour illustrations, which are handsomely reproduced here and show the young aristocrat with curls falling over his forehead, as also seen in later paintings.

Particular attention is given to the most iconic depictions of Byron: two oil paintings of 1813-14 by Royal Academician Thomas Phillips. These half-length portraits, which show the sitter in three-quarter profile, are described as instrumental in establishing 'brand Byron' (57). They were displayed at London's Royal Academy in 1814 as 'Portrait of a Nobleman' and 'Portrait of a Nobleman in the Dress of an Albanian,' although many visitors would have known whom they depicted. Byron's identity as a poet was already established by that time and he had completed a Grand Tour of the Iberian peninsula and the Ottoman territories in the Levant, which had informed the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, published in 1812. While the so-called 'Cloak' portrait, which shows Byron swathed in a dark cloak, makes no specific reference to either his travels or his writing, the so-called 'Portrait of a Nobleman in the Dress of an Albanian' is more clearly linked to both of these. Byron had purchased the 'Albanian' costume on his Grand Tour, complete with a turban and an embroidered jacket and waistcoat, and his choice to be depicted in these reflected a fashion for such orientalisering depictions of European travellers at the time. What is distinctive about Phillips's portraits, as highlighted by Bond and Kenyon Jones, is the way in which they were used as prototypes for subsequent printed images, some of which were used to promote Byron's writings. Harnessing visual imagery for such marketing purposes highlights the close links between literature and portraiture at this time.

A particular strength of *Dangerous to Show* is this exploration of the printed imitations of Byron's formal portraits, for example engravings after the full-length oil painting of 1807-9 by Scottish artist George Sanders. Often used as frontispieces, such graphic artworks adapted and altered their source image according to the requirements of a specific project. As well as demonstrating the impact of the printed image upon the dissemination of Byron's likeness, this volume seeks to interpret other less well-known depictions of the poet in a range of film imagery, memorabilia, satirical cartoons, and even a waxwork of Byron dressed in the aforementioned 'Albanian' costume. As such, it goes beyond many existing studies in its

presentation of a wide range of portrait formats, created both for the promotion of Byron's work and the reassessment of his legacy.

Bond and Kenyon Jones's generously-illustrated volume provides a timely account of Byron's wide-ranging portraits and their close relation to his travels and writing. *Dangerous to Show* illuminates not only the poet's life story, as told through contemporaneous artworks, but also explores the afterlives of these images through their later replication and reinterpretation. More widely, it constitutes a valuable case study in how visual culture can be harnessed for the purposes of self-fashioning and promotion, a process which, in Byron's case, is shown to have 'rendered him immortal' (15).

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