What Happened to Harold's Sense of Humour?

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Along with much that is lacrymose, Byron's early poetry – the poetry he wrote before going abroad on his first Eastern voyage, before he became famous – contains much sharp and excellent buffoonery. The following passage from his 1809 satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* may serve as an example:

> Next comes the dull disciple of thy school,
> The mild apostate from poetic rule,
> The simple WORDSWORTH, framer of a lay
> As soft as evening in his favourite May;
> Who warns his friend "to shake off toil and trouble,
> And quit his books, for fear of growing double";
> Who, both by precept and example, shows
> That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose,
> Convincing all by demonstration plain,
> Poetic souls delight in prose insane;
> And Christmas stories tortured into rhyme,
> Contain the essence of the true sublime:
> Thus when he tells the tale of Betty Foy,
> The idiot mother of "an idiot boy";
> A moon–struck silly lad who lost his way,
> And, like his bard, confounded night with day,
> So close on each pathetic part he dwells,
> And each adventure so sublimely tells,
> That all who view the "idiot in his glory",
> Conceive the Bard the hero of the story.
>
> (*EBSR* 235-4: CPW I 236)

Later in Byron's career, after England had ostracised him, and provided him with the detachment necessary to feel as he had before he became famous, he returned to the attack. This is from *Don Juan*:

> And Wordsworth, in a rather long "Excursion"
> (I think the Quarto holds five hundred pages)
> Has given a sample from the vasty Version
> Of his new System to perplex the Sages;
> 'Tis Poetry – at least by by his assertion,
> And may appear so when the DogStar rages;
> And he who understands it would be able
> To add a Story to the Tower of Babel. –
>
> (*Don Juan* Dedication, Stanza IV)

What I wish to examine first is the contrasting middle section of Byron's career, when humour seemed to desert him – at least in verse. It did not desert him in his "real" life, as this extract from a letter to Thomas Moore of October 1815 shows:

> Yesterday, I dined out with a largish party, where were Sheridan and Colman, Harry Harris of C[ovent] G[arden] and his brother, Sir Gilbert Heathcote, D[ougla]s Kinnaird, and others, of note and notoreity. Like other parties of the kind, it was first silent, then talky, then argumentative, then disputatious, then unintelligible, then altogethery, then inarticulate, and then drunk. When we had reached the last step of this glorious ladder, it was difficult to get down again without stumbling; – and, to crown it all, Kinnaird and I had to conduct Sheridan down a d**d corkscrew staircase, which had certainly been constructed before the discovery of fermented liquors, and to which no legs, however crooked, could possibly accommodate themselves. We deposited him safe at home, where his man, evidently used to the business, waited to receive him in the hall (BLJ IV 326-7).

And in 1813 Byron wrote *The Devil's Drive*, a savage satire on European bloodshed and English corruption which anticipates much of his powerful later work. But he didn't publish *The Devil's Drive*, and it remained unknown until after his death. For Byron the poet, who "awoke" in 1812 "to find himself famous", humour is banished deliberately. We see the process in the very first poem on which his fame rested, *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* I and II. This originally contained the following lines, on the Convention of Cintra:

> In golden characters right well designed
> First on the list appeareth one "Junot";
> Then certain other glorious names we find,
> (Which Rhyme compelleth me to place below:)
> Dull victors! baffled by a vanquished foe,
> Wheedled by conynge tongues of laurels due,
> Stand, worthy of each other in a row –
> Sirs Arthur, Harry, and the dizzard Hew
> Dalrymple, seely wight, sore dupe of t'other tew. (CPW II 19)

… and these, on the English habit of appropriating Greek antiquities:

> Come then ye classic Thieves of each degree,
> Dark Hamilton and sullen Aberdeen,
> Come pilfer all the Pilgrim loves to see,
> All that yet consecrates the fading scene –
> Ah! better were it ye had never been,
> Nor ye, nor Elgin, nor that lesser wight,
> The victim sad of vase–collecting spleen,
> House–furnisher withal, one Thomas hight,
> Than ye should bear one stone from wronged Athena's sight. (CPW II 48)

The verses are not *that* funny – Byron found it hard to be facetious and light in the Spenserian stanza – but one can see the comic intention. However, the stanzas were cut, along with several others, at the insistence of his publisher and friends, with minimal protest from him. Perhaps he sensed that, while they may have been false friends, antipathetic to his attempt at creating a mixed, Ariosto-like style, in another sense their judgement was correct, because solemnity sold better than satire in England during the Napoleonic wars. One who mocked might be suspect politically – a friend of France, even. How else do we explain the collection of solemn poems out of which Byron's fame developed further – the six so-called "Turkish Tales" (one of them is set

in Spain, and another in Italy) with their (mostly) chaste heroines, and their violent but ineffectual heroes, who are always going into revolutionary postures but who never carry out any revolutionary acts?

Imagine a pirate, who is feared by his men, who never drinks alcohol, who eats coarse bread and root vegetables, who scarcely smiles and seldom sighs … let Byron say the rest (the character is Conrad, from *The Corsair* of 1814):

> Though smooth his voice, and calm his general mien,
> Still seems there something he would not have seen:
> His features' deepening lines and varying hue
> At times attracted, yet perplexed the view,
> As if within that murkiness of mind
> Worked feelings fearful, and yet undefined;
> Such might it be – that none could truly tell –
> Too close enquiry his stern glance would quell.
> There breathe but few whose aspect might defy
> The full encounter of his searching eye;
> He had the skill, when Cunning's gaze would seek
> To probe his heart and watch his changing cheek,
> At one the observer's purpose to espy,
> And on himself roll back his scrutiny,
> Lest he to Conrad rather should betray
> Some secret thought, than drag that chief's to day.
> There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
> That raised emotions both of rage and fear;
> And where his frown of hatred darkly fell,
> Hope withering fled – and Mercy sighed farewell!
>
> (*The Corsair*, I, 207-26: CPW III 157-8)

One might imagine such a protagonist flourishing in scenes of violent action, and calculating the odds cannily. But Conrad disguises himself as a monk for no obvious reason, and goes to reconnoitre the already-reconnoitred stronghold of his enemy. Despite this double reconnoitre, he underestimates his enemy's strength, and gets himself captured, imprisoned and sentenced to impalement. One might imagine such a man (when at liberty) enjoying the company of spirited women, and accepting help phlegmatically from wherever it might come from. But when Gulnare, one of the poem's two heroines, who has fallen in love with Conrad, helpfully murders her master, his enemy, as her master sleeps, and comes to Conrad's cell with blood upon her person, like a Lady Macbeth who has "done the deed" unassisted, Conrad goes all to pieces:

> He had seen battle – he had brooded lone
> O'er promised pangs to sentenced guilt foreshown;
> He had been tempted – chastened – and the chain
> Yet on his arms might ever there remain:
> But ne'er from strife – captivity – remorse –
> From all his feelings in their inmost force –
> So thrilled – so shuddered every creeping vein,
> As now they froze before that purple stain.
> That spot of blood, that light but guilty streak,
> Had banished all the beauty from her cheek!
> Blood he had viewed – could view unmoved – but then
> It flowed in combat, or was shed by men! (*The Corsair*, III, 418-9: CPW III 204)

We know that the times were sexist, but this is (unintentionally) laughable. "Bring forth men-children only" (Macbeth's admiring line to *his* homicidal helpmeet) is the last thing Byron would allow Conrad to say; it would imply a small degree of irony, a certain jocularity, between man and woman, which Byron – who liked a woman with a sense of mockery – hence the primacy Augusta had in his affections – seems unable ever to put into his verse. Here, Conrad, the protagonist, is not seen in any kind of realistic way, and one is reminded of what one of the early French critics said of the "Byronic hero":

> C'est toujours un pirate renégat que sa naissance appelait à un plus noble destinée; ce pirate aime une jeune fille tendre, bien innocente, dont il est aimée; il pille, il tue, il est tué; telle est l'analyse de la plupart des poèmes de lord Byron. Trace–t–il le portrait de ses héros? Vous pouvez être sûr d'avance qu'il y a un *vague* indéfinissable dans leur figure, du *vague* dans leurs discours, du *vague* dans leurs mouvements, du *vague* dans leurs conduits, parce qu'il y a beaucoup de *vague* dans la tête du poète (Bequet, *Le Journal des Débats* April 23-4 1821, quoted Estève, *Byron et le Romantisme français*, pp. 88-9).

The vagueness of Byron's most popular poems – most popular, that is, with the audience whom he would eventually despise – is, I would argue, a consequence of his judgement – of which perspective, irony and humour are essential parts – being relegated to limbo. He certainly saw the poems in that light, even though – or perhaps because – *The Corsair* sold 10,000 copies on its first day. In an 1813 letter to Thomas Moore he wrote,

> I have tired the rascals (i.e. the public) with my Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates. Nobody but S<outhe>y has done any thing worth a slice of bookseller's pudding; and he has not luck enough to be found out in doing a good thing ... (BLJ IV 252-3)

In fact he was, he confessed later, ashamed of the success of the Turkish Tales. In 1821 he wrote of his contemporaries

> They have raised a Mosque by the side of a Grecian temple of the purest Architecture – and more barbarous than the Barbarians from whose practice I have borrowed the figure – they are not contented with their own grotesque edifice – unless they destroy the prior and purely beautiful fabric which preceded and which shames them & theirs forever & ever. – – I shall be told that amongst these – I <u>have</u> been – (or it may be still <u>am</u>) – conspicuous; – true – and I am ashamed of it; I <u>have</u> been among the builders of this Babel attended by a confusion of tongues – but <u>never</u> amongst the envious destroyers of the classic temple of our Predecessor (CMP 148: the "Predecessor" is Pope).

Notice the echo of the Tower of Babel joke in *Don Juan* which I quoted near the start of this paper: *And he who understands it would be able / To add a Story to the Tower of Babel.* Byron has, by his own confession, joined the Babel-builders.

It is hard to think that he is writing merely with hindsight, and that a degree of this shame was not amongst the emotions he felt even while enjoying the success the Tales brought him. He was certainly not averse to all the money he accrued. It used to be a commonplace that Byron debated "whether he dared or cared to violate his own pride by accepting money for his literary work" (Marchand I 424). However, researches into his bank account show that, although he did give some copyrights away, he had by the time he left England in 1816 received 1,000 guineas from John Murray for *the Ode to Napoleon*, 700 pounds for *Lara*, another thousand guineas for *The*

Giaour and *The Bride of Abydos*, and yet another thousand for *Parisina* and *The Siege of Corinth*: 3,750 pounds in all. Doubtless it helped him to bear the shame of his poetic dereliction.

Central to the sins depicted in the "Turkish Tales" is treachery – Dante's primal sin. We have treachery to one's friend (*The Giaour*) to one's host (*The Corsair*) to one's uncle and liege-lord (*The Bride of Abydos*) to one's father (*Parisina*) or to one's native country (*The Siege of Corinth*). Central to the plot is often the figure of the renegado – he who, quitting one allegiance, tries to recreate his life around another, whether via piracy, via mercenary soldiering, or via religious conversion, but fails (*The Siege of Corinth* is especially successful in examining such failure). It's tempting to see this matrix of dysfunctional social relationships as a metaphor for Byron's relationship with his own reading public and his own group in society – he provided them with the kind of high-quality Orientalist trash they craved, even while despising them for craving it and despising himself for writing it. Before he left England, he published several pro-Napoleon verses anonymously, as if to hint what they'd suspected about him all along. After he'd left he published the poems under his own name.

Even for the post-1816 exiled Byron, ostracised by the "rascals" who had granted him his fame, humour and verse seem at first to have been incompatible. Here are Stanzas 71 and 72 of *Childe Harold* III:

> Is it not better, then, to be alone,
> And love Earth only for its earthly sake?
> By the blue rushing of the arrowy Rhone,
> Or the pure bosom of its nursing lake,
> Which feeds it as a mother, who doth make
> A fair but froward infant her own care,
> Kissing its cries away as these awake; –
> Is it not better thus our lives to wear,
> Than join the crushing crowd, doom'd to inflict or bear?
>
> I live not in myself, but I become
> Portion of that around me; and to me,
> High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
> Of human cities torture: I can see
> Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
> A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
> Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,
> And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
> Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.

The most important poetic influence on these self-regarding lines is that of Wordsworth, whom Shelley had invited Byron to re-evaluate. The previously despised fall-guy has become, incongruously, the guru. There may be some humorous touches in, for example, *Childe Harold* – I'm impressed by the fact that there was "mounting in hot haste" on the eve of Waterloo – but you have to look carefully for it.

But it was not to last long. Professor Jerome McGann, editor of the Oxford Byron, said in a recent and much-discussed lecture that Byron's first play, *Manfred* – written in Switzerland soon after *Childe Harold* III, and perhaps conceived at the same time – is a creative, or, rather a destructive, riposte to the Wordsworthian influence to which Shelley had submitted him, and which he had found, almost at once, to be distasteful and inefficacious. *Manfred* is his most confessional work – obsessesd with confession only, showing no inclination towards repentance, absolution or

atonement. If Professor McGann's argument is just, it is striking that that all three quasi-confessors in the play are images of Wordsworth.

In Professor McGann's analysis, three figures in *Manfred* embody Wordsworthian values. The first is the Witch of the Alps, who offers the tortured hero a kind of Wordsworthian nature-therapy. The second is the Chamoix Hunter, who is a Michael or Leech Gatherer, offering stoical-Christian peace of mind. Manfred is unable to avail himself of either comfort. Third and most important is the Abbot of St Maurice, who appears in Act III, who – in Byron's *first* version of that act – demands money as the price of Manfred's absolution, and who is ejected from Manfred's castle in the following confrontation:

Abbot: Then hear and tremble! – for the headstrong wretch,
Who in the mail of innate hardihood
Would shield himself, and battle for his sins,
There is the stake on earth, and beyond earth,
Eternal ——

Manfred: Charity, most reverend Father!
Becomes thy lips so much more than this menace,
That I would call thee back to it; but say,
What wouldst thou with me? – – –

Abbot: It may be there are
Things that would shake thee, but I keep them back,
And give thee till tomorrow to repent.
Then, if thou dost not all devote thyself
To penance, and with gift of all thy lands
To the Monastery——

Manfred: I understand thee. Well.

Abbot: Expect no mercy; I have warned thee. –

Manfred *(opening the casket)*: Stop –
There is a gift for thee within this casket –

Manfred opens the casket, strikes a light, and burns some Incense.

Manfred: Ho – Ashtaroth! –

The Demon Ashtaroth appears, saying as follows – –

Ashtaroth's Song

The Raven sits
On the Raven-stone,
And his black wing flits
O'er the milk-white bone,
To and fro, as the night-winds blow;
The carcase of the assassin swings,
And there alone, on the Raven–stone,
The Raven flaps his dusky wings;
The fetters creak, and his ebon beak

Croaks to the close of the hollow sound;
And this is the tune, by the light of the Moon,
To which the Witches dance their round. –
Merrily, merrily! Cheerily, cheerily!
Merrily, merrily speeds the ball;
The dead in their shrouds, and the demons in clouds,
Flock to the Witches' Carnival. –

Abbot: I fear thee not – hence – hence –
Avaunt thee, Evil One! Help! Ho! Without there!

Manfred: Carry this man to the Shreckhorn – to its peak –
To its extremest peak – watch with him there
From now till Sunrise – let him gaze, and know
He ne'er again will be so near to Heaven;
But harm him not – and when the Morrow breaks,
Set him down safe in his cell – Away with him! –

Ashtaroth: Had I not better bring his brethren too,
Convent and all, to bear him company?

Manfred: No, this will serve for the present. Take him up. –

Ashtaroth: Come, Friar! Now an Exorcism or two,
And we shall fly the lighter. –

Ashtaroth disappears with the Abbot, singing as follows

A prodigal son, and a maid undone
And a widow re-wedded within the year,
And a worldly Monk, and a pregnant Nun,
Are things which every day appear.

Manfred *(alone):* Why would this fool break in on me, and force
My art to pranks fantastical? No matter –
It was not of my seeking. My heart sickens,
And weighs a fixed foreboding on my Soul;
But it is calm – calm as a sullen sea
After the hurricane; the winds are still,
But the cold waves swell high and heavily,
And there is danger in them. Such a rest
Is no repose. My life hath been a combat,
And every thought a wound, till I am scarred
In the immortal part of Me.

For "Shreckhorn" read "Cumberland fells", and for *gift of all thy lands / To the Monastery* Professor McGann would probably have us read "Wordsworth angling for the post of Collector of Stamps for Westmoreland". Notice, however, that, once the buffoon-Abbot has been airlifted to the Schreckhorn's summit, Manfred resumes his posture of Childe-Harold-ish introspection. The Abbot may have been amusing, but Manfred is unable to view himself in the same light.

The point about this scene is that Byron rejected it, and re-wrote it, on receiving the criticisms of William Gifford, the crabbed old Tory pedant who read for John Murray. Byron was in awe of

Gifford's literary taste throughout his life, and Gifford was one of the parties behind the decision to remove the comic stanzas from *Childe Harold* I and II. On Gifford's suggestion, Byron deprived the Abbot of his material greed, gave him more Christian charity and persuasiveness, and cut Ashtaroth completely. There may be humour in the new third act, but, again, you have to fish hard for it. It's strange to think of Byron being insecure artistically, but he seems to have been, even when fate seemed to be dictating that, canting and hypocritical England having rejected him, it was time to revert to drollery and derision.

On the fourth side of the eleventh sheet of the rough manuscript of *Beppo*, the first wholeheartedly comic poem of his exile, written in two nights at Venice in October 1817, Byron writes the following:

150
[x] 9
1350

84
[x] 8
672

1350 [+672]
2022

The sums are written horizontally, with received stanza 46 of *Beppo* written vertically nearby: "84 x 8" is a calculation of the number of eight-line stanzas in the very first rough version of *Beppo*, before he inserted any extra sheets; "150 x 9" is an approximate count of the nine-line stanzas of *Childe Harold IV*, the mega-solemn poem at which he was still working when he drafted *Beppo.* He is calculating how much money he can charge John Murray for each of his two new poems. The contrast between the passion of the *Beppo* stanza (it is stanza 46, starting *Eve of the land which still is paradise*) and the financial calculation, is grotesque, but its implication is dramatic – Byron is putting one period behind him and starting another, for *Beppo* leads on to *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement*, and they are the three comic masterpieces on which his fame now rests (Professor McGann would have us see *Manfred* as a comic masterpiece, but can find few to agree with him).

Beppo is not the first poem Byron wrote in ottava rima – that honour goes to a single-verse squib about Robert Southey which he wrote in 1813, but did not publish – partly because he couldn't finish it, trying out five different couplets (CPW III 90-1); and the moving *Epistle to Augusta* of 1816 ("My Sister – my Sweet Sister") shows a very skilful handling of the six-plus-two form, which proves that even at this early stage Byron could see its potential for tenderness and regret, as well as for satire and bathos. But in October 1817 his friends the Kinnairds, visiting him in Venice, brought him, as a recent Murray publication, an odd thing called *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work*, supposedly by the brothers Whistlecraft, of Stowmarket, in fact by the retired diplomat John Hookham Frere. It is quaint and dull (I've never succeeded in finishing it) but Byron found something in its style which appealed. His best friend Hobhouse tells what happened:

> … the real origin of Beppo was Mr Frere's burlesque poem "Whistlecraft" which the late Lord Kinnaird read to Byron in the autumn of 1817 at Venice. After reading it Lord Kinnaird asked Byron if he did not think it was a very clever and a very difficult performance. Lord Byron replied that he thought it very clever but not very difficult – and two days later produced Beppo. (Hobhouse, unpublished criticism of Stendhal, quoted LLB p. 390).

The protagonist of *Beppo* is everything an old-style Byronic hero should be – an exile, a pirate, a renegado, a wronged husband, and a spectre-at-the-feast. Only his name separates him from his predecessors – "Beppo", as Byron tells us gleefully in a note, is the Italian for "Joe", and it makes a big change from Conrad, Lara, Hugo, Selim and Alp (though "Harold" might be thought sufficiently mundane). But it is a sign of Byron's new maturity that, even while travestying the material of the Turkish Tales, he contrives to deepen its resonance, for Beppo / Joe is also a version of Homer's Odysseus, and of Shakespeare's Othello. Here, from the very end of the poem, is his homecoming (his Ithaca is Venice) and the moment when he confronts his domestic problem (his Desdemona / Penelope is called Laura, and her Cassio / Suitor is simply The Count). You will notice the utterly different style in which Byron is suddenly writing:

The Count and Laura found their boat at last,
    And homeward floated o'er the silent tide,
Discussing all the dances gone and past,
    The Dancers, and their dresses too, beside,
Some little Scandals eke: but all aghast
    (As to their palace stairs the rowers glide)
Sate Laura by the side of her Adorer,
When lo! the Mussulman *[i.e., Beppo]* was there before her!

"Sir!" said the Count with brow exceeding grave,
    "Your unexpected presence here will make
"It necessary for myself to crave
    "Its import – but perhaps 'tis a mistake;
"I hope it is so, and at once to wave
    "All Compliment – I hope so, for *your* sake;
"You understand my meaning, or you *shall*" –
"Sir" (quoth the Turk) "'tis no mistake at all,

"That Lady is *my Wife!*" Much Wonder paints
    The Lady's changing cheek, as well it might,
But where an Englishwoman sometimes faints,
    Italian females don't do so outright;
They only call a little on their Saints,
    And then come to themselves, almost, or quite,
Which saves much hartshorn, salts, and sprinkling faces,
And cutting stays, as usual in such cases. –

She said – what could she say? why, not a word:
    But the Count courteously invited in
The Stranger, much appeased by what he heard;
    "Such things perhaps we'd best discuss within" –
Said he – "don't let us make ourselves absurd
    "In public by a Scene – nor raise a din,
"For then the chief and only satisfaction
"Will be much quizzing on the whole transaction."

They entered, and for Coffee called; it came,
    A beverage for Turks and Christians both,
Although the way they make it's not the same;
    Now Laura much recovered, or less loth

To speak, cries "Beppo! what's your Pagan name?
"Bless me! your beard is of amazing growth!
"And how came you to be away so long?
"Are you not sensible 'twas very wrong?

"And are you *really*, *truly*, now a Turk?
"With any other women did you wive?
"Is't true they use their fingers for a fork?
"Well, that's the prettiest Shawl – as I'm alive!
"You'll give it me? – they say you eat no pork –
"And how so many years did you contrive
"To – bless me! did I ever? No – I never
"Saw a Man grown so Yellow! How's your Liver?

"Beppo! that beard of yours becomes you not –
"It shall be shaved before you're a day older –
"Why do you wear it? – Oh! – I had forgot,
"Pray don't you think the weather here is colder?
"How do I look? You shan't stir from this spot
"In that queer dress, for fear that some beholder
"Should find you out, and make the story known –
"How short your hair is – Lord! how Grey it's grown!"

What answer Beppo made to these demands
Is more than I know! He was cast away
About where Troy stood once, and Nothing stands,
Became a Slave of course, and for his pay
Had bread and bastinadoes, till some bands
Of pirates landing in a neighbouring bay,
He joined the rogues and prospered, and became
A Renegado of indifferent fame.

But he grew rich, and with his riches grew so
Keen the desire to see his home again,
He thought himself in duty bound to do so,
And not be always thieving on the Main;
Lonely he felt at times as Robin Crusoe,
And so he hired a vessel come from Spain,
Bound for Corfu; she was a fine polacca,
Manned with twelve hands, and laden with tobacco.

Himself, and Much (Heaven knows how gotten) Cash
He then embarked, with risk of life and limb,
And got clear off, although the attempt was rash;
He said that *Providence* protected him,
For my part, I say nothing – lest we clash
In our opinions – well – the Ship was trim,
Set sail, and kept her reckoning fairly on,
Except three days of Calm when off Cape Bonn.

They reached the Island, he transferred his lading,
And self, and live–stock, to another bottom,
And passed for a true Turkey-Merchant trading
With goods of various names – but I've forgot 'em;

However, he got off by this evading,
  Or else the People would perhaps have shot him,
And thus at Venice landed to reclaim
His wife, religion, house, and Christian name.

His wife received, the Patriarch re-baptized him,
  (He made the Church a present by the way)
He then threw off the Garments which disguised him
  And borrowed the Count's small-clothes for a day;
His friends the more for his long absence prized him,
  Finding he'd wherewithal to make them gay,
With dinners – where he oft became the Laugh of them –
For stories – but *I* don't believe the half of them.

Whate'er his Youth had suffered, his old Age
  With wealth and talking made him some amends;
Though Laura sometimes put him in a rage,
  I've heard the Count and He were always friends;
My pen is at the bottom of a page,
  Which being finished, here the story ends;
'Tis to be wished it had been sooner done,
But Stories somehow lengthen when begun.– (*Beppo*, Stanzas 87-99)

The self-refashioning (done, remember, in just two Venetian nights) is remarkable. In the would-be comic Spenserian stanzas of *Childe Harold* Byron can only sneer and nudge. In the heroic couplets of *The Corsair* he seems unwilling to create any funny moments other than unintentional ones, and glances at his Shakespearean subtext only to avert his gaze. But the ottava rima of *Beppo* is truly conversational, infinitely light, infinitely flexible, and can at the same time carry an enormous load of Homeric and Shakespearean subtext, as naturally as the human body carries the pressure of the atmosphere. And Beppo the protagonist is – thanks to a realistic leavening of material detail – far more convincing as renegado and pirate than Conrad ever was in *The Corsair*. His bribe to the Patriarch of Venice echoes the Abbott's offer to Manfred, of absolution for a fee, and voices Byron's feelings about the Christianity of his day – whether Anglican or Catholic – but *en passant*, as it were, as though no gentlemen need labour such an obvious point.

John Murray was so delighted with *Beppo* that he printed three editions before Byron had even corrected the proofs, and then gave the public a choice between either putting down the same money for a fourth, complete edition, or buying a small pamphlet with the new stanzas and corrigenda. Byron was sufficiently encouraged to write, in the year following, the first canto of *Don Juan* – a poem firstly so funny, and secondly so openly and calculatingly offensive to genteel Englishness, that Murray would eventually not be able to publish it at all.