

Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's Life in Italy (Vie de Lord Byron en Italy)*, trans. Michael Rees, ed. Peter Cochran. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. 8 ill. (5 in color), 19 Appendices, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by James A. W. Heffernan in *European Romantic Review* 19: 5 (December 2008): 489-93.

Byron's earthly afterlife began almost as soon as he was buried. Though his own reportedly salacious memoirs were promptly wrested from Thomas Moore (to whom he had given them in 1819) and burned at the insistence of John Cam Hobhouse, he left himself to be re-created in a succession of books that started appearing within months of his death at Missolonghi on April 19, 1824. Not counting the diary of his best friend Hobhouse, which did not appear in any form until 1909 and is not even now fully available except on the internet (www.hobby-o.com), the first four books—chiefly recollections of his life at specific periods—all came out in 1824, and they were soon followed by Count Pietro Gamba's *Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece* (1825), Edward Blaquièrè's *Last Days of Lord Byron* (1825), and Leigh Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (1828). In 1830 came the first attempt at what might be called biography: Thomas Moore's *[N]otices of his Life*, adjoined to Moore's 2 volume *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, then revised and republished in Moore's 17-volume *Works of Lord Byron* in 1832.

Contessa Teresa Guiccioli never even tried to catch these early runners. She had known Byron intimately for more than four years--from early April of 1819 up to his departure for Greece in July of 1823--and she started planning a two-part account of him in 1834. But she did not finish either part until 1868, when the second part, *Lord Byron jugé par les Temoins de sa Vie*, was published in Paris, where she had lived for almost twenty years with her second husband, the Marquis de Boissy. Translated into English, *Lord Byron jugé* then appeared in London and New York as *My Recollections of Lord Byron, and those of Eyewitnesses of His Life* (1869), but the first part failed to follow. Racked with neuralgia for the last years of her life, Teresa could not finish her *Vie de Lord Byron en Italie* before her death in 1873, at the age of 75. She left only a manuscript that was given in the early 1950s to the Biblioteca Classense of Ravenna. Two books partly based on the manuscript—Iris Origo's *The Last Attachment* and Maria Borghese's *L'Appassionata di Byron*--appeared in 1949, and thirty-four years later it was published in facsimile (9 vols., with an introduction by Erwin A. Sturzl, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1983). But only now, nearly two centuries after Byron breathed his last at Missolonghi, has Teresa's narrative of Byron's life in Italy finally found its way into print.

In her lifetime she did all she could to shape the public record of Byron's life, especially as it touched on hers. She contributed several notes to the first edition of Moore's *Life*, then deplored its coarseness and inaccuracies. In two letters of early October 1832 to John Murray (Moore's

publisher as well as Byron's), she lamented its "want of delicacy" and asked him to "omit some *words*, and correct some *errors of dates &c.*" in the second edition, since the first one struck her as a warehouse of "*useless, harmful_and good things*" all thrown together (qtd. Cochran, Introduction, *Vie* 29). Her own emendations are curious. Though she first came to know Byron when she was twenty-one, she insisted that she had been only sixteen, and though Byron himself had written to Moore of his "adultery" with Teresa, she could not bear the word. "[It] is *cruel*," she writes, "and could at least be sostituted [sic] by an other less odious" (qtd. *Vie*, p. 31). Murray obliged her as much as he could, compromising on the age at which she first caught Byron's attention (Murray made it 17, which is also what Byron had thought it was [*Vie*, p. 169]), and deleting altogether Byron's reference to adultery. Teresa wanted Byron commemorated as a pillar of virtue, which meant scrubbing both of them clean of every smudge. She would do all in her power, she writes, "to raise the opinion of the many excellen[cies] and Virtues of my noble friend—and that will be the object of my life henceforth" (qtd. Cochran, Introduction, *Vie* 30).

At first glance, this hagiographical project seems risible, and we may find ourselves wondering not so much why Teresa's *Vie* should have languished in manuscript for more than a century as why it should be published at all—even now. Why should we even consider a book that aims to canonize the greatest rake in literary history, a man whose venereal appetites--whether heterosexual, homosexual, or incestuous--were insatiable?

Only months before meeting Teresa, he cast himself in a letter to Murray as a nonstop Priapus. After listing 22 women by name plus various others (“some noble—some middling—some low--& *all* whores”), he winds up saying, “I have had them all & thrice as many to boot since 1817.” (Letter to Murray of January 19, 1819). Does this not prove that he was indeed mad, bad, and dangerous to know?

Yes, but only if we take the letter at face value. Only if we fail to realize that even when writing to his publisher in private, he is flaunting his wickedness, parodying the much-circulated stories of his escapades by posing as the re-incarnation of Mozart’s Don Giovanni and—as Leporello too—singing his own catalogue aria of indiscriminate conquests. Though Cochran tells us that he caught gonorrhoea from at least one of the ladies he mentions, he is playfully shaping his *persona* here—as Jerome Christensen has argued—for marketing and public consumption. So far from denying any tale of his tugging, he pretends to confirm it a hundred times over. His pretense of Priapism is the flip side of the claim made by the narrator of *Don Juan*, who tells us that he “hate[s] inconstancy” yet only “last night” felt himself villainously aroused by a fetching Milanese (2: 209). Just as the would-be constancy of Byron’s narrator cannot withstand occasional distraction, Byron himself could not function, indefatigably, as a sexual machine gun.

In any case, Teresa made him hers. However much he may have exaggerated his sexual voracity before meeting her, the road of his excess—

or sexual exhaustion-- soon led to the palace of devotion. On April 22, 1819, nineteen days after their first meeting, he wrote to her (in Italian), “Before I knew you—I felt an interest in many women, but never in one only. Now I love *you*. There is no other woman in the world for me.” (qtd. Introduction, *Vie* 9). Is this yet another pose by the man of many turns, or a self-deluding gush of infatuation? If so, how could it have lasted so long? Whatever the aims of Teresa, we can hardly ignore the testimony of any woman who could so long satisfy this notoriously restless man and whose account of his life in Italy covers most of the period missed by Hobhouse. As Cochran observes, “Teresa’s witness is based on four years of intimacy, of a kind that no other woman—perhaps no other person—accumulated” (*Vie*, p. 43). This alone surely justifies the present edition.

On the other hand, it does not mean that we must leave our sense of irony at the doorway to her text. The lovely young woman who suddenly captivated the 31-year-old Byron on an enchanted April evening in Venice was not a dewy ingénue. Educated in rhetoric, literature, and philosophy at the elite Santa Chiara school in Faenza and married for just over a year to Alessandro Guiccioli, a widower old enough to be her grandfather (she was his third wife), she had already savored her first affair the previous summer, and in November she had prematurely begotten a son (presumably Alessandro’s) who lived just four days. In light of that history, her loathing of the very word “adultery” suggests nothing so much as the vow made by Donna Julia, the restless young wife of the fifty-year-old Don Alfonso in the

first canto of *Don Juan*. While seated in a bower with Juan on a lovely evening in June, she inwardly swears “never to disgrace the ring she [wears]” just before taking his hand “quite by mistake” and then leading them both into irresistible temptation (1. 109). A little later in the poem, Julia is awakened on a November evening by a servant who—in stanza 137--urgently tells her that her husband is coming. Coincidentally, on a November evening several months into her own affair with Byron, when Teresa asked him what was meant by this stanza (she could not readily construe the English), he answered in Italian, “nothing but ‘your husband is coming’ ”—with dramatic emphasis on the quoted words. According to Byron, Teresa “then started up in a fright and said—‘*Oh my God—is he coming?*’—thinking it was *her own* who either was or ought to have been at the theatre” (Letter to Murray of November 8, 1819). Has life ever imitated art so well?

Teresa’s resemblance to Juan’s first lover in a poem she herself called “abominable” (Byron to Augusta, October 5, 1821, qtd. Introduction, *Vie*, 11) is just one of the many paradoxes of her liaison with Byron, who--by her own account—once commissioned her to write the story of his life. “*Will you write my life in Italy one day?—in your best Santa Clara style,*” he is said to have asked her (*Vie* 1190, p. 456). This could have been simply a joke, for Byron put the question “smilingly” right after telling her *not* to bother correcting a lie that had just been published about him; “what does one lie more or less matter,” he asked, “after all?” (*Vie* 1190, p. 456). But whether

or not Byron truly cared about the facts or wanted Teresa to record them, she herself felt driven to do so—more precisely to set what she believed to be the truth of Byron’s life against all of the lies told in previous books about him.

Unlike Byron, however, she loathed unpleasant truths. Byron wrote *Don Juan* largely for the traditionally satirical purpose of attacking vice and folly by means of ridicule, stripping human nature of sentiment and hypocritical pretense so as to bare its reality. After reading in French translation the first two cantos of the poem, which had been published shortly after she met Byron, Teresa grasped its aim all too well. Even though she at first decried the “unfair criticisms” of the poem and the demands that Byron “mutilate [it] so as to gratify the cant of the day” (*Vie*, p. 133), she herself ceaselessly begged him to stop writing it because—aside from all the virulent attacks it had provoked—“a satirical poem . . . could not possibly avoid hurting the feelings of individuals and nations, by telling them . . . a string of home truths” (*Vie*, p. 290). By early July 1821, with Cantos 3-5 in press, she had made Byron promise that he would write no more of it unless she “*authorize[d]*” him to proceed (*Vie*, p. 290). Byron’s own explanation of why she made him stop is that women are addicted to sentiment and therefore allergic to truth. In a letter to Murray of July 6, 1821, he says that Teresa’s aversion to *Don Juan* “arises from the wish of all women to exalt the *sentiment* of the passions--& to keep up the illusion which is their empire—Now DJ strips off this illusion--& laughs at that and most other things” (qtd. *Vie*, 290).

Very well then: how could Byron bear the steady company of anyone so wedded to illusion—let alone comply with her insistence that he give up his poem? The simple answer is that Byron himself was not wedded to satire, and was therefore willing to curb his Juvenalian impulses for her sake. Not one thorn of satire, for instance, pricks the twenty-nine lyrical stanzas describing the love that flows between Juan and Haidee just before her father confronts them in Canto 4 (8-36). Whether or not this passage reflects the influence of Teresa herself, who was often with him in Ravenna while he wrote Cantos 3-5 (*Vie*, p. 289), she was so moved by the beauty of these cantos—as well as by Mary Shelley’s arguments in favor of Byron’s continuing the poem—that she lifted her ban against it on March 4, 1822, the day Mary came to see them (*Vie*, pp. 416-17). Byron had secretly re-started it one or two months earlier, just six months after stopping it (*Vie*, p. 417n), but the fact that he set it aside for even half a year shows how much he deferred to the woman he called his “Censor Morum” (Letter to Moore of August 27, 1822). I would not claim that Teresa drew Byron from the trenches of satire to the heights of lyricism, for even the first two cantos of *Don Juan* include some twenty poignant stanzas on the outbreak of love between Juan and Haidee (2.184-204). But is it fanciful to suspect that Teresa touched and quickened Byron’s heart, that she revived what remained of his capacity to love, and thus fed his power to express it? If there are any grounds for such a suspicion, Teresa’s book must surely shed some light on Byron’s later poetry as well as on the life of the poet himself.

Teresa's Byron is anything but a reckless libertine. "There was no vice in him," she writes, "neither extravagance nor avarice, neither dissipation nor gambling." (*Vie*, p. 546). In Genoa, where she and her father and brother shared a palazzo with Byron from October 1822 to the following July, a visiting Pisan friend of hers thought Byron's *modus vivendi* so monotonous and serene that it might be called "the life of an anchorite in the desert of Thebes" (*Vie*, p. 515). In the sketch of him made that summer by the young Count Alfred d'Orsay (repr. *Vie*, p. 541), he looks almost undernourished. But his soul had been thriving ever since he met Teresa. In August 1821, when he was living with her in Ravenna (she had been formally separated from her husband the year before), Shelley found the poet "greatly improved in every respect—in genius, in temper, in moral thews, in health and happiness. His connection with La Guiccioli has been an inestimable benefit to him. He lives in considerable splendour, but within his income, which is now about four thousand a year, one thousand of which he devotes to purposes of charity. He has had mischievous passions, but these he seems to have subdued, and he is becoming, what he should be, a virtuous man." (qtd. *Vie*, pp. 320-21). Did he owe this reform to her? Cochran implies rather that she may have helped him rediscover his best self. "Either by coincidence, or as a direct result of meeting her, Byron put most of his colorful [!] habits behind him from April 1819 onward, allowing greater prominence to the Christian stoic, who had always lurked behind his facetiousness, and his appetite for high living." (*Vie*, p. 43).

With Teresa's ardent support, he traded high living not only for plain living (in palazzos, that is) but also for the highest productivity of his life. During the four years of their liaison, he wrote *Marino Falieri*, *Cain*, *The Two Foscari*, *Heaven and Earth*, *The Age of Bronze*, *The Vision of Judgment*, *Sardanapalus* and nearly all of *Don Juan*, which she came to admire as "a magnificent poem . . . perhaps the wittiest of all this century's productions" (*Vie*, p. 418). Three other poems that he wrote in these years—*Stanzas to the Po*, *Francesca da Rimini*, and *The Prophecy of Dante*-- sprang from her suggestions, and it was also she who challenged his conviction that love had no place in modern tragedy and thus led him to furnish *Sardanapalus* with a devoted mistress--Myrrha.

But Teresa's Byron is much more than an ascetic workhorse. He is a tireless enemy of injustice, an impassioned defender of Italian liberty against the oppressive bureaucrats of Austria (who hounded Teresa's family as a way of hounding him), a champion of the persecuted, and a generous benefactor in small as well as large ways (on hot summer nights at Montenero, he loved to order sherbets for everyone, including the servants). Altogether, Teresa makes Byron a secular saint. Besides treating their love as impeccably Platonic, she draws him through a lens of adoration that admits no ray of defect. He was, she improbably assures us, "a stranger to the art of contradiction" (*Vie*, p. 515). He could not "have written poetry arising from low life" (*Vie*, p. 383), though as Cochran notes, he certainly does so in *Don Juan* (e.g., 11.11-19). He treated his daughter Allegra "like

an affectionate father” (*Vie*, p. 440), though for more than a year before her death he did not visit her—even when she fell ill. And when he finally left Teresa in July 1823, it was not at all (she says) to get away from her, even though months earlier he had intimated to Hobhouse that he wanted to end their liaison (qtd. *Vie*, Appendix, p. 647), and even though he later told Henry Fox that he wanted to break free of both Teresa and her family (qtd. *Vie*, Appendix, p. 656). According to her, the family he wanted to leave behind was that of Leigh Hunt, whom he had graciously supported in Italy but who soon bored him and who would later write what she considered a treacherous book because—among other things—it treats Byron as her lover.

Teresa’s book is worth gleaning for such things as its fascinating word-portrait of the 29-year-old Shelley (*Vie*, p. 325) and its deft encapsulizing of his idealism: “He lived in the world like a spirit who had fallen into it against his will, rather than as a being clothed in human nature” (*Vie*, p. 371). But Teresa herself often slights the raiment of earthly fact. Though she aimed to correct the errors disseminated by memoirists such as Hunt and Lady Blessington, whose *Conversations with Lord Byron* (1834) she considered largely fictive (*Vie*, pp. 542-43), her own book has to be read with the corrective footnotes supplied by its editor, especially when she rewrites letters in the process of translating them for inclusion (Cochran prints the originals whenever available, then records Teresa’s emendations in the notes.) Repetitive as well as often inaccurate, and padded with material now readily available from other sources (especially Byron’s *Letters and*

Journals), this book will probably serve largely for reference, or perhaps as a quarry for excerpts in the next edition of a Romantic anthology.

On the whole, the book has been conscientiously translated and edited, with a substantial introduction, very informative footnotes (just occasionally redundant) and a series of appendices that complement Teresa's narrative, beginning with a selection of her letters to Byron in Italian and English translation. There is just one major defect—most glaring in the index, which is otherwise admirable in its analytical thoroughness. Instead of referring to the pages of the present edition, the index refers to the page numbers of Sturzl's nine-volume facsimile (as in 7, 1258 for volume 7, page 1258). Bracketed within the text, these numbers tell us where each of Teresa's pages begins and ends, but since they are printed in small, light roman digits that may appear anywhere on a page, they are not easy to find, and their use in the index needlessly prolongs the quest for references.

This is not the book Teresa dreamed of publishing. Since it corrects her on many points, above all on her refusal to admit that she was Byron's mistress, it would probably have disturbed her. Nevertheless, it plainly reveals the depth of her admiration for Byron, the grounds for it, and the power of the love they shared. As improbable as it may seem from all the rest we know of him, this book prompts the conclusion that Countess Teresa Guiccioli was the single the most influential woman in Byron's life.

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