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“Boundless Thoughts and Free Souls”

Teaching Byron’s Sardanapalus, Lara, and The Corsair

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O’er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,
Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,
Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,
Survey our empire, and behold our home!
These are our realms, no limit to their sway,—
Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey.
—Byron, The Corsair

My students often find Byron irresistible. Works such as Manfred and The Corsair appeal to their love of the Byronic hero—his “boundless” thoughts and limitless freedoms—even though most students have yet to learn why Byron or the Byronic hero exemplifies these qualities or why they already have such familiarity with Byron and the Byronic. Students are less enamored of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, finding it plodding, maudlin, and, to use their ubiquitous word, “boring.” Don Juan brings them no end of pleasure, especially after hearing various snippets of Byron’s biography, which they can intersperse within the text itself. They find the bedroom scene between Donna Julia, Don Alfonso, and Don Juan extraordinarily funny, although the dark humor of the shipwreck scene often remains opaque to them. I have used “Darkness” quite successfully in my introductory composition and literature classes; its compact and concise structure, intense sentiments, and pervasive gloominess poignantly speak to them in a post-9/11 world. Repeatedly, though, they have balked at the Oriental tales, finding the language and context too difficult and foreign to fathom. (Incidentally, they dislike William Beckford’s Vathek for the same reasons.) As a result, I have been forced to find or create inventive means by which to help them understand
Invariably, my students carp about relevance: Why is this work important? How does it relate to our lives? How will reading it help us get better jobs? Leaving that last question for another time and place, I find their first two concerns notable but often ambiguous. After all, we can talk extensively about canonization, about literary histories, about authorial intentions and objectives, but I believe these questions belie their deeper concerns, the basis of which underscores their uncertainty about their place in the world and the importance of their response to how we make meaning in texts. As such, I introduce my students to Reception Theory, which allows them to better understand not only their own responses but also the importance of those responses to the academic community at large.

For help in understanding Reception Theory, I often introduce my students to Hans Robert Jauss, who investigates the synergistic give-and-take among audience, text, and author, formulating the construct as a three-sided figure connected at each focal point. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Jauss says:

> In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees. For it is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into the changing horizon-of-experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them. (19)

According to Jauss, addressees actively create the text while they are simultaneously limited by the text’s horizons. A complex mediation results, whereby the audience actively engages the text and develops a critical understanding of it, a process that crystallizes into a new production “through negation of familiar experience or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness” (25). Jauss stipulates how the text regulates and influences readers’ interpretations by emphasizing a series of expectations against which readers can distinguish the text. This “dynamic process” actively articulates the audience and the work, which can be “objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience’s reactions and criticism’s judgment” (25). The work and audience create continually renewing “horizons-of experience,” the ever-broadening landscapes of critical and perceptual understanding, through which “recognized aesthetic norms” are transformed into “new
productions” that surpass or efface their originals but also retain enough of the former material to be recognizable in each incarnation. To put it another way: “These changing expectations, coupled with knowledge of (and reaction to) past readers’ responses, combine to produce for each literary work a critical ‘tradition’ that is continuously enriched and modified as new generations of readers emphasize different points or see old ones in a new light” (Murfin and Ray, 332). In general, the audience consumes material and transforms it into critical discourse, thereby augmenting and enhancing the constantly expanding horizon for future generations. As Jauss says, the “next work can solve formal and moral problems left behind by the last work, and present new problems in turn” (32).

Jauss can be easily allied with Edward Said through the “horizon-of-experience.” Said defines Orientalism as a “way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (1). As such, Orientalism works within a horizon that has been mediated by the audience’s presumption of knowledge and familiarity of European explorers and travelers. This continuity persists because it hasn’t been limited by an explicitly defined understanding of places and cultures. Said defines the Orient as an “invention” and a “created consistency,” a constructed simulacra that has no origin except through the embellished tales of authors and ambassadors. Said suggests that Orientalism has “less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (12). Consequently, as Jauss would say, we can see how the landscape of critical and perpetual understanding has remained within a passive construction, never moving beyond this compliance with the myth to an active engagement with the object itself. With no “negation” of the “familiar experience,” the Orient continues to exist as the romantic, exotic world with which Europeans had become comfortable.

The European reading audience, which had long been devouring material about the Orient, incessantly refashioned and perpetuated this landscape through their own writing and conversation. Said has observed that “Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs. At most, the ‘real’ Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it” (22). I suggest to my students that this fascination with and construction of the Orient continues today and that they are an integral part of this continuing process. I provide such filmic examples as Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; The Matrix Trilogy; and Kill Bill, Volume 1 and Volume 2 as evidence of our unrelenting fascination with the myth and fantasy of the Orient. They begin to see how we as audience members manifestly construct the view that most easily and comfortably fits within our own “horizon-of-experience.”
Byron, as both author and audience, remains, while he writes within a liminal state between author and audience through the mediation of the text. In his elucidation of Gadamer, Jauss stipulates, “the producer of a text becomes also a recipient when he sets out to write” (“Changing Horizon,” 148). By filling this doubled and mediated role, Byron varies the scope and alters the boundaries of the horizon of experience and expectation. However, this dialogue between author and audience generates an alterity that prefigures and influences the relationship between producer and consumer. Jauss continues: “A dialogue consists not only of two interlocutors, but also of the willingness of one to recognize and accept the other in his otherness” (“Changing Horizon,” 148). As a writer, one sees oneself as both the subject and the object, as both the self and the other. Consequently, an author always remains in both an empathetic and an antagonistic relationship with his/her audience, even through a visualization of him/herself as audience.

This, I argue, is Byron’s objective in creating the vampiric curse in The Giaour: he ultimately transforms his reception anxiety into an Orientalist trope that assaults and preys upon the audience that would consume him. Since the predatory and supernatural vampire can be seen as the superlative “Other,” it becomes an apt metaphor to describe the writing process and linguistic relationships. Byron characterizes his reading audience as an entity that consumes him through the medium of his work: they drain it of its content and meaning, and then introduce an appropriated approximation back into the mediation. A new creation emerges, not the original but not distinct either: effectively, it emerges as an amalgamation of old and new, reformulated and reinvigorated. The production, consumption, and reproduction of the linguistic relationship are analyzed from a synchronic perspective within a historical diachrony. To this end, a “representation of literature in the historical succession of such systems would be possible through a series of arbitrary points of intersection between diachrony and synchrony” (Aesthetic, 39). Consequently, the audience receives and consumes Byron’s works, then mediates between the text and the next generation of audience members. The “evolution” continues with this mediation of past and present, which must be viewed through synchronic points of intersection that eventually produce a diachronic literary history. Individual representations of the Byronic vampire evoke question-and-answer formulations of previously consumed texts, which in turn sustain the tropes that inform the subsequent fictional representations, thereby perpetuating their reproducibility.

This metaphor of reproducibility informs not only the way Byron and his audience serve as reciprocal interlocutors, but also how the audience reconfigures Byron as the Orientalized vampire. Ghislaine McDayter theorizes Byron’s audience as parasitical and ties Byron’s discomfort over production
to the literary commodification so prevalent during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Byron would not “be the slave to any appetite,” she says and extrapolates: “While that included the appetites of his lovers, it referred more particularly to his adoring ‘fans,’ who were always assumed to be female (or at least feminized), and who the poet came increasingly to regard as insatiable beings who fed upon his literary corpus to satisfy their taste for the Byronic” (43). The exaggerated gendering of Byron’s audience generates an insidious heterosexism by asserting that Byron’s “lovers” and “fans,” and by extension his insatiably voracious consumers, were always assumed female or feminized. Moreover, by appending sex, this gendering intensifies Orientalized vampirism as well. Byron thus keeps the vampires and victims, much as Stoker does in Dracula, explicitly heterosexual. I would argue that Byron’s readers and lovers were both male and female, and that the vampiric trope that weaves its way through this Byronic intertextuality also bespeaks a homoerotic articulation.

McDayter rightly suggests that Byron came to see his audience as increasingly and ravenously consuming, always clamoring for more of what he had previously provided. Byron says to John Murray: “I knew the precise worth of popular applause—for few Scribblers have had more of it.” While always appreciating an enthusiastic audience, Byron lamented the relentless necessity of continually playing to its wants and fancies for works that resembled his previous compositions: “If I chose to swerve into their paths—I could retain it or resume it—or increase it—but I neither love ye—nor fear ye—and though I buy with ye—and sell with ye—and talk with ye—I will neither eat with ye—drink with ye—nor pray with ye” (Byron’s Letters & Journals [hereinafter BLJ] 6:108, April 6, 1819). Byron’s quotation from Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice is telling, not only because he acknowledged the inevitability of bartering his goods for fame and applause despite his denials to the contrary, but also because he recognized the thankless and exhausting nature of writing. On the one hand, Byron needed his audience but, on the other, loathed their voracious appetites. Playing to them while mocking them, he implicitly asked for their acceptance while he explicitly castigated them for their constant clamor.

This public cacophony for all things Byronic established dissonance for Byron rather than harmony. He privileged his writing, demeaned his audience, and alluded to the Bible when he said that he had been throwing his “pearls to Swine.” He continues: “[A]s long as I wrote the exaggerated nonsense which has corrupted the public taste—they applauded to the very echo—and now that I have really composed within these three or four years some things which should ‘not willingly be let die’—the whole
herd snort and grumble and return to wallow in their mire” (BLJ 9:160–61, May 20, 1822). Somewhat late in his writing career, Byron debases his early Gothic and Oriental writing as “exaggerated nonsense” with which he has “corrupted” the public view and ruined his audience for anything that he might write later in a different genre or fashion. “It is fit that I should pay the penalty of spoiling them—as no man has contributed more than me in my earlier compositions to produce that exaggerated & false taste—it is a fit retribution that anything [like a?] classical production should be received as these plays have been treated.” The sympathetic and antagonistic attitudes clash here, inasmuch as the Gothic and Oriental genres that had produced so much fame and cachet for Byron had become a horizon that was no longer secure. The exotic and fanciful productions had fashioned an “exaggerated” and “false taste,” a horizon of experience and expectation that Byron would have to contest with any new text.

I inevitably suggest to my students that Byron appears somewhat disingenuous here. He demeans his adoring public but never long forgets its powerful influence on his writing. In a letter to Douglas Kinnaird, Byron asserts: “I never courted the public—and I never will yield to it” (BLJ 9:93–94, January 26, 1822). Byron belies his desire for public approval here, but the notion that an audience may be courted and a writer yield to its wishes reiterates the sympathetic and antagonistic as well as erotic conflict. McDayter asserts, “[A]ll of the Romantics repeatedly used metaphors of parasitic consumption and alienation to describe their perceived loss of cultural and interpretive authority” (44). Byron writes within a horizon of experience already primed for his “parasitic” creation. In The Giaour, Byron transformed his anxiety and anger over his text’s reception into a fictionalized vampiric curse. In the Oriental Tales, Byron transforms his extensive knowledge of Oriental mores and culture into credible characters and compelling narratives; his characters represent the Eastern milieu rather than merely evoke it.

Returning to the work of Said, I intimate that while his theories work quite well on a continental scale, they might not so easily function for specific individuals, especially Byron.1 Said suggests that Europeans reiterated their “superiority over Oriental backwardness” (7). I would argue that, if anything, Byron establishes an Oriental superiority against which he measures the English and often finds them lacking. After all, Byron did not “invent” the Orient—he characterized and embodied it. In his Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron’s Oriental Tales, Naji B. Oueijan concurs: “In his Oriental tales, Byron’s major concern is studying the Object to present as it was and not as it was imagined” (11). Oueijan distinguishes a “genuine” Oriental work from a “false” one as follows:
First, the Oriental ingredients found in the genuine literature are essential to the creation of local color of the East and for the enhancement of the Eastern ideas of the works, while the Oriental elements in the inauthentic literature are merely present for decorative effect; second, the authors of the first type of works consciously present in their works authentic pictures of the East motivated by pure scholarly interests, while those of the second type sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously exhibit in their works highly imaginative and distorted images. (12)

While I caution my students that black-and-white designations such as “genuine” and “false” often demonstrate a more complex grayness and fluid representation, I do agree with Oueijan that Byron tends more toward the “genuine” and less toward the “false” because of his extensive travels and his remarkable tendency toward assimilation and adaptation. Still, Byron was working within a horizon of Orientalism that had been constructed long before his “Grand Tour”; as such, he was surely influenced by his culture’s obsession with the constructed mythology and fantasy.

Having thus explained the intricacies of Jauss and his connection to Said, I then emphasize and employ their theories to help my students better understand how to read and understand Byron’s Oriental Tales. The triangular functioning of author, text, and audience presents itself as a tool by which to formulate not only the active mediation within the horizons of experience and expectation, but also the synchronic and diachronic literary histories. For the author aspect, I use excerpts from Byron’s letters and journals to elucidate key moments in Byron’s life and creative process; for the context and historical nuances of the text, I supplement Byron’s Oriental Tales with excerpts from Oueijan’s Compendium, his articles in Prism(s), Daniel P. Watkins’s Social Relations in Byron’s Eastern Tales, Jerome J. McGann’s notes from Byron: The Complete Poetical Works (hereinafter CPW), and Nigel Leask’s British Romantic Writers and the East; for the audience component, I draw upon excerpts from Donald H. Reiman’s The Romantics Reviewed as well as my students’ personal responses to the texts. Obviously, these are not the only sources one might exploit, but I find them invaluable for expanding and complicating Jauss’s triangle as it relates to Byron’s Oriental Tales.

Byron’s letters and journals provide extensive background and contextual information relating to his Grand Tour and his mental disposition during the composition of the various tales. His lively writing style and dry-witted humor appeal to my students where other sources, such as biographies or criticisms, might fall on deaf ears. For example, after arriving in Lisbon, Portugal, he writes to Hodgson on July 16, 1809: “I am very happy here because I love oranges, and talks bad Latin to the monks, who understand it, as it is like
their own,—and I goes into society (with my pocket pistols), and I swims
in the Tagus all across at once, and I rides on an ass or a mule, and swears
Portuguese, and have got a diarrhoea and bites from the mosquitoes. But
what of that? Comfort must not be expected by folks that go a pleasuring”
\((\text{BLJ, 1:215})\). Students enjoy his unceremonious yet expressive narration and
cavalier attitude about traditionally personal subjects. They come to feel as
if they know this Byron, as if he is speaking to them across the ages. Conse-
quently, students have expressed during discussions the heightened sense of
relevance and immediacy his poetry brings to them as a result of knowing
more about his life and his viewpoints.

I take advantage of the episode with the Ali Pasha to introduce issues
regarding sexuality, even though I have to caution my students that what we
today would understand as a sexual orientation would not have existed in
the same form during the early nineteenth century. In a letter to his mother
on November 12, 1809, Byron recounts the meeting as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I was dressed in a full suit of Staff uniform with a very magnificent saber} \\
\text{... he received me standing, a wonderful compliment from a Mussulman,} \\
\text{& made me sit down on his right hand. ... He said he was certain I was a} \\
\text{man of birth because I had small ears, curling hair, & little white hands,} \\
\text{and expressed himself pleased with my appearance & garb.—He told me to} \\
\text{consider him as a father whilst I was in Turkey, & said he looked on me as} \\
\text{his son. ... He begged me to visit him often and at night when he was more} \\
\text{at leisure. (BLJ, 1:227–28; original emphasis)}
\end{align*}
\]

In his biography, Marchand suggests that Byron “recognized more fully
when he had reflected upon the interview and had seen more of Turkish
manners, that Ali’s observation of his handsome features had a particular
meaning more personal and sensuous than an interest in his noble birth or
rank would have elicited” (210). I would argue that the implicit meaning
behind these invitations didn’t require too much of Byron’s self-reflection
at a later period. He would have fully recognized the implied suggestion at
the moment it was made to him. This was, after all, one of the main reasons
he had chosen to visit Turkey: to explore sexual avenues that were trodden
far more openly in the East and that were illegal and punishable by death in
England. Interestingly, he sends Rushton home because, as he explains to his
mother, “\textit{boys are not safe amongst the Turks}” (\textit{BLJ, 1:222; original empha-
sis}); at twenty-one, Byron was hardly more than a boy himself.

Byron’s sexuality has received much attention from critics and biogra-
phers alike. I don’t have the room within this essay to recount the extensive
scholarship relating to this subject:’ I would, however, suggest, as I do with
my students, that Byron desired to explore this aspect of his life more fully; one of the only ways to accomplish this was to travel to a place where it was more openly tolerated. To Henry Drury on June 25, 1809, Byron wrote: “I have laid down my pen, but have promised to contribute a chapter on the state of morals, and a further treatise on the same to be entituled ‘Sodomy simplified or Paederasty proved to be praiseworthy from ancient authors and modern practice.’—Hobhouse further hopes to indemnify himself in Turkey for a life of exemplary chastity at home by letting out his ‘fair bodye’ to the whole Divan” (BLJ, 1:208). In a letter to Drury dated May 3, 1810, he says: “In England the vices in fashion are whoring & drinking, in Turkey, Sodomy & smoking” (BLJ, 1:238). Said suggests that the “Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic being, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). For Byron, the East was indeed a place to unearth these “exotic beings” and experiences, and then recount these “remarkable experiences” to numerous friends and family in England.

Both Crompton and Christensen have commented upon Byron’s need to leave England and explore the East within a sexualized context. Crompton’s chapter, “To the East,” in Byron and Greek Love speaks for itself in that Crompton thoroughly explores the various texts and readings that influenced Byron’s travel plans. Moreover, he pays particular attention to the codes that permeate Byron’s letters and journals as well as the young men (e.g., Eustathius Georgiou or Niccolo Giraud) whom Byron encountered and wooed. In Lord Byron’s Strength, Christensen says that “Asia Minor” was a “domain where Byron [could] safely indulge his peculiar appetite” (54). Continuing, Christensen asserts that Byron insisted Hobhouse return to England after an extended period so that he could correspond with him about his latest exploits: “The departure of Hobhouse is ultimately less important for allowing Byron to have the experience than it is for enabling Byron to represent the experience, tantalizingly, as a scene for an audience of intimate male friends” (59; original emphasis). Moreover, Christensen stresses that what they shared was a “literary sense of identity . . . formed by the positing of a particular kind of sexual experience as something that, because it cannot meet the eye, underwrites everything that can” (60; original emphasis).

Not only was Byron using the “Grand Tour” to explore these various aspects of his sexuality, but he was also using the letters to his friends in England as a way to solidify his sexual adventures within discourse. Byron was fascinated with language. In a diary entry on November 16, 1813, he recites lines from Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, which he had seen with Matthew Lewis at Covent Garden: “and are not ‘words things’ and
such ‘words’ very pestilent ‘things’ too?” (BLJ, 3:207; original emphasis). This concept would later appear in Don Juan: “But words are things, and a small drop of ink, / Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces / That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think” (CPW 3:793–95). Throughout his writing life, Byron remained poignantly aware of the power of words and his ability to manipulate them to his advantage. As for Byron’s relationship with his readership, which I mentioned previously, he acknowledged and appreciated popularity’s appeal and his audience’s pleasure, but he also feared its all-consuming voraciousness. He became prey to his audience members’ incessant demands for travelogues and moody heroes. His new works bumped up against the aesthetic resonance of his established works, thereby creating a dissonance between the expectations of his audience and his own expectations for a new construction. In Jaussian fashion, Byron’s new production enters into a horizon of experience that his audience wishes to remain static; however, through the operation of this new production, the horizon of experience changes, leading the contemporary audience to resist or accept the change but allowing future generations to experience an altered horizon of expectation. Consequently, his focus on words as things lends itself to a heightened awareness of both his prowess as an author and his influence on his audience. Moreover, by disseminating discourse about his sexual exploits, he uses a medium through which language itself solidifies, accentuates, and legitimizes his sexual fluidity. As Christensen observes: “The profession is formed by the positing of a particular kind of sexual experience as something that, because it cannot meet the eye, underwrites everything that can” (Lord Byron’s Strength, 60).

Once my students and I have examined the ways in which Byron’s life, letters and journals, and homoerotic inclinations have influenced the writing of the Oriental Tales, we look at the tales themselves in order to focus on Jauss’s second component: the text. Rather than spend too little time here detailing my readings of the texts, which differ only slightly from the traditional readings of these works, I will instead focus on the secondary texts I employ to help my students better understand the primary ones. I assign the introduction to Said’s Orientalism, so that we have a foundation and vocabulary from which to speak about such tales as The Giaour, Lara, and The Corsair. The initial focus on Orientalism allows us to better understand the European construction of the Orient and, as Said says, the “deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). Since few of my students have ever visited the lands and people about which Byron speaks and writes, I necessarily incorporate Said in order for them to gain perspective about our cultural representations and relationships “of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5).
I complicate Said’s theories, though, with Naji Oueijan’s *Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron’s Oriental Tales* as well as his articles from *Prism(s)*. Usually, I place my copy as well as the library’s copy on reserve, so that my students can have access to the material as needed. I explain that Oueijan complicates Said’s theories about the “East-West relationship” and that the conflict was not necessarily caused by Islamic and Christian fundamentalists but by “world-powers” (8). I also explore Oueijan’s suggestion that Said “confuses the Romantics’ tendency to medievalize with their earnest proclivity to Orientalize” (10). Still, I must admit that I spend less time on Oueijan’s problems with Said and more time on his elaborations of Eastern elements. Since many of my students are unfamiliar with the East’s traditions, holy sites, rituals, names, and mythology, I strongly urge them to peruse Oueijan’s extensive and detailed explanations for a better understanding of the historical and contextual aspects of the *Oriental Tales*. This allows them to appreciate Byron’s symbolism and imagery more immediately. For instance, Oueijan explains that Gulnare’s name refers to “pomegranate-flowers,” an apt metaphor for “a beautiful Eastern flower, but a flower with thorns that hurt” (109), a definition that provides a nice introduction to a conversation about Gulnare’s murderous repayment of Conrad’s self-sacrificing rescue of her from the fire.

Depending upon which tales I’m teaching, I assign the pertinent portions from Nigel Leask’s *British Romantic Writers and the East* and Daniel P. Watkins’s *Social Relations in Byron’s Eastern Tales*, as well as the endnotes from McGann’s *Byron: Complete Poetical Works*. Both Leask and Watkins incorporate a historical component into their readings of the tales, which allows my students to better understand the time period and context of the works. Leask, much like Oueijan, complicates Said by showing “that the internal and external pressures determining and undermining such representations [of the Oriental Other as a monological construct] are more various than Said’s thesis will allow” (2). Here again, though, I spend less time focusing on Leask’s problems with Said and more time on how his interpretations help us to better understand the critical tradition and the place these tales inhabit within, as Jauss would say, a literary series. I emphasize how Leask shows Byron reflecting “upon his own culture as the world’s dominant colonial power, and upon the significance of his own complicity in that power as a poet of orientalism” (23). This idea helps to initiate a conversation about colonialism in general, and about England’s imperial dominance during the nineteenth century. Moreover, we can then discuss Byron’s place in this hierarchy, as an aristocrat and as a widely popular poet, and whether or not he was “complicit” within and privileged by this structure of “dominance.”

I also use Leask to once again emphasize the sexuality within the *Oriental Tales*...
In addition to suggesting an interesting comparison between the dyad of Lara and Kaled, and Byron and Niccolo, he also establishes homoerotic conventions within the narrative itself: “[T]he focus on Kaled’s ambivalent identity at the critical moment of Ezzelin’s denunciation of Lara has the effect of foregrounding its importance, creating a climax of mystery and suspense in the replacement of the customary female figure by an object of homosexual desire” (58). I inevitably cite Lady Byron’s remembrances of Byron’s feelings toward Lara: “There’s more in that than any of them, [said Byron] shuddering and avoiding my eye” (Astarte; original emphasis, 20).

Not only, I suggest to my students, does Byron’s concept of the hero incorporate aspects of the innocent youth with the libertine, of the sacred with the profane, of the condescending with the cursed, but it also incorporates the two disparate and stereotypical views held of same-sex desire: the Platonically heroic and the doctrinally damned. Byron reinterprets and merges this dichotomy into a much more edifying, much less antagonistic view, bringing about a resolution, both for himself and for those around him.

I often move from Lara to Sardanapalus in order to capitalize on the prevailing sexuality and gender issues within these works. Invariably, I point out to my students that these plays, as Byron himself urged repeatedly, were meant to be imagined in the mind rather than performed on stage. They regularly disagree with this, envisioning directors who could easily translate this material into film; we often cast actors into the parts, which allows them to better visualize the characters and eventually the cinematography. I promote these activities because my students’ imaginations are inclined toward the visual rather than the aural or linguistic. Through casting these characters with well-known celebrities, they become more intimately involved in the plot and structure of the play itself. This helps immensely when it comes time to explain the historical or contextual ramifications of the Assyrian monarchy or the Zoroastrian mythology.

Sardanapalus as Oriental despot provides ample opportunities to discuss gender and masculinity. We begin by locating the numerous passages that describe the king as “effeminate,” “voluptuous,” “man queen,” “soft yet beloved,” “she-king,” and “less than woman.” The double entendre of the scepter and its varying stages of tumescence rarely goes unnoticed. Andrew Elfenbein’s work on effeminacy from Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role works quite well here and I assign the introduction and chapter 1 from his text as supplemental reading. He says:

Effeminacy had a long history in civic humanism as an image of corrupted manliness. An effeminate man gave himself over to intemperance, typically at the cost of neglecting public good for private indulgence. His intemper-
ance might involve sodomy, because taking the passive position in sex with another man was supposedly an example of immoderation. Yet it might just as well involve subservience to a wife or mistress, lecherousness, or the compulsive pursuit of sexual experience to the neglect of more “manly” activities, excessive attention to fashion and coiffure in an attempt to attract women more effectively, or conversely, such personal vanity and self-absorption as to preclude any but the feeblest interest in sexuality at all. (20)

Sardanapalus fits more comfortably within the latter category than the former. He is denigrated and scorned because he continually exposes himself to sumptuousness, becoming a veritable despot of “vice and luxury.” His peaceful and beneficent reign causes uneasiness and malevolence within the ranks of his advisers and allies. Byron echoes Machiavelli when he says that it is better for a king to be feared than loved. Sardanapalus eventually exonerates himself on the battlefield, fighting with vigor and valor but only after having thoroughly appraised his armored appearance in a full-length mirror.

I often assign the specific chapter from Watkins to supplement whichever of the Oriental Tales we are reading. He nicely encapsulates a historical and contextual reading within each section, which allows my students to understand more fully the elaborate and sometimes veiled intertextuality. Watkins underscores the “complex network of relations that defines and ultimately controls social reality. Specifically, the tales describe the pervasive cultural attitudes, practices, and beliefs which, under certain circumstances, not only limit human independence, but in fact support reactionary and morally destitute social systems” (16). My students find these “relations” the most difficult facet of the tales, and so, even though they find Watkins somewhat difficult to comprehend, they inexorably arrive at a greater appreciation of the texts as a result of having read his work. Watkins allows us to discuss how Byron “often placed considerations of human experience within an encompassing social context” (16). As such, we can situate Byron within a larger context of social customs and ethical ameliorations while at the same time seeing his overt disdain for tyrannical dominance and brutality. Along these lines, Watkins focuses upon the “powerful (if submerged) social imagination controlling much of [Byron’s] poetry.” For my students, this remains essential to understanding the Oriental Tales within a larger historical and societal milieu.

As for the audience awareness component of the Jaussian triangle, I begin by focusing on the extraordinary popularity of the Oriental Tales during Byron’s time. I recount how The Corsair sold ten thousand copies on the first day of publication, a notable feat before the advent of industrialized
print. Leask avows: “Byron was encouraged by his publisher John Murray to make the most of the saleability of poetry with an ‘oriental flavour,’ and the series of *Eastern Tales* produced between 1813 and 1816 made him the most popular poet in Britain and established the ‘Byron Myth’ as a European phenomenon” (14). For confirmation of this, I usually direct them to Donald H. Reiman’s *The Romantics Reviewed*, which I also place on library reserve. With little direction as to which criticism to read, many students surprise the class with different excerpts from numerous sources. This allows them to both confirm the “myth” with glowing reviews or to refute the “myth” with vitriolic censure. They are inevitably surprised yet fascinated by the overt glorification or denunciation within these excerpts, having been raised upon at least an assumption of the media’s objectivity. We can then talk about the ways in which criticism has either remained the same or changed over the succeeding one hundred and eighty or so years between these various reviews and our classroom discussions. Reiman’s numerous volumes serve as an excellent resource for contemporaneous views on Byron’s poetry and how his life became integrated within the concept of the Byronic hero itself.

As an additional emphasis on public writing and audience perceptions, I require my students to submit weekly e-mails that the class Web site distributes to each student. The e-mails act as communal reading journals, becoming progressively more and more intertwined as the semester advances. Once a week, each student receives approximately one-half to three-quarters of a typed page of text from each student in the class detailing the concerns, insights, or problems that are arising. On student/teacher evaluations, they invariably grouse about the weekly necessity and then move on to say how much they learned from the exercise. They move, as Jauss says, “from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them.” Through actively becoming engaged in their learning process and through developing a shared critical response to the texts at hand, they enter into the “historical life of the literary work” by becoming “active” participants within the “changing horizon-of-experience” (*Aesthetic*, 19).

By providing my students with the aforementioned Jaussian structures, I hope to help them not only to understand more fully Byron’s *Oriental Tales* but also to appreciate more comprehensively any literature that they study. Fundamentally, I ask my students to recreate Byron in their own constructed image and situate him within a historical and cultural milieu. Watkins says that his aim in *Social Relations in Byron’s Eastern Tales* is to allow the “poems to throw the rich detail of social life into relief, to magnify rather than obscure its active role” (34). I attempt a similar goal with my students by using Jauss as a template for their learning structure, thereby allowing the
“rich detail” of the *Oriental Tales* to “magnify” my students’ “active roles” as readers, scholars, and critics.

NOTES

1. Leask suggests a similar reading of Said: “It seems to me that whilst Said is right in asserting the links between knowledge of the East . . . and the history of colonial power, he is wrong in denouncing it a ‘closed system.’ The (plural) anxieties of empire which I will be examining in the works of Byron, Shelley and De Quincey and numerous other British Romantic writers cannot be laid on any such procrustean bed” (2).

2. For further information on Byron, Romanticism, and sexuality, see: Crompton, Christensen, Knight, Moore, Grebanier, Wolfson, Haggerty, Moore, Elfenbein, and Soderholm, among others.

3. Another excellent analysis on the relationship between Byron’s work and sexuality can be found in Keegan.