

# Lord Ruthven's Power: Polidori's 'The Vampyre', Doubles and the Byronic Imagination

SIMON BAINBRIDGE

## 1. 'Who could resist his power?': 'The Vampyre' and Byronism

Towards the end of 'The Vampyre', the remarkable short story in which John Polidori transformed the image of the legendary bloodsucking predator by associating it with the glamorous, aristocratic and mysterious figure of Lord Byron, the third-person narrator finally reveals the nature of Lord Ruthven's 'irresistible powers of seduction'.<sup>1</sup> Describing how the vampire Ruthven has 'won the ear of Miss Aubrey', the sister of his European travelling companion, the narrator asks:

Who could resist his power? His tongue had dangers and toils to recount – could speak of himself as of an individual having no sympathy with any being on the crowded earth, save with her to whom he addressed himself; – could tell how, since he knew her, his existence had begun to seem worthy of preservation, if it were merely that he might listen to her soothing accents; – in fine, he knew so well how to use the serpent's art, or such was the will of fate, that he gained her affections. (pp. 22–23)

Polidori presents Ruthven's irresistibility as a product of his mastery of the rhetoric of Byronic poetics. Ruthven's 'power' derives from his use of language ('his tongue') and particularly from his ability to exploit the two most distinctive features of Byron's writing of the 'years of fame' – exciting romance narrative and sympathy-evoking self-presentation – to create a particular kind of subject position for his listener. Ruthven appeals to Miss Aubrey by offering her a seemingly empowering role as the only individual capable of saving him from his fallen and dissolute state in exactly the way that Byron's verse constructed a reading position eagerly occupied by many of his women readers.

As a number of recent critics have shown, through his verse Byron created a relationship of peculiar intensity and unprecedented intimacy between his poetic persona and the woman reader in which the latter felt that she alone could truly understand the poet and redeem and reform him through her love (a process which obscured the relations of production and consumption in a period of mass publishing and the commodification of the author).<sup>2</sup> Such a response to Byron's poetry was most famously enacted by his future wife, Annabella Milbanke, who, as Fiona MacCarthy comments, 'shared with many others of his devotees the conviction that she, and she only, could save him from his rakish past'.<sup>3</sup> Several other women readers made themselves the referent of Byron's love poems, fancying themselves imaged in his verse.<sup>4</sup> Lady Falkland, the

## Simon Bainbridge

widow of one of Byron's friends to whom he showed generosity after her husband's death, provides the most famous example of this process of self-identification when reading Byron's poetry, and her letters to the poet reveal how his verse encouraged this form of reader response.<sup>5</sup> Admiring Byron's 'Thyrza' poems, which were published as part of the *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* volume (and were written about the Cambridge chorister John Edleston), Lady Falkland not only identifies herself as their object but also sees herself as the figure who can 'constitute' the poet's 'happiness':

Tell me my Byron – if those mournful, tender effusions of your Heart & mind, to that Thyrza, who you lamented as no more – were not intended for myself – [...] now my Byron if you really believe I could add to or constitute your happiness, I will most joyfully receive your hand – but remember I must be loved exclusively.<sup>6</sup>

Lady Falkland also puts herself in the role of Byron's reformer, remarking of his previous 'follies' and 'vices' that they 'have I hope been warnings to you my Dearest Byron, and I trust will teach you to shun the path which leads to so many evils'.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most revealing of the dynamics of Lady Falkland's sense of intimacy with the poet are the parts of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which she alludes to when she makes the claim that she is 'certain' that 'it was myself you meant in the Romaunt', offering as evidence 'Your saying that you were withheld by every tie from offering your hand and heart'.<sup>8</sup> The lines from *Childe Harold* to 'Sweet Florence' that Lady Falkland is referring to (in fact addressed to Constance Spencer Smith) make exactly the same appeal to the reader as Ruthven does to his listener – as the only person with whom the poem's isolated and world-weary hero can possibly find sympathy or love:

Sweet Florence! could another ever share  
This wayward, loveless heart, it would be thine:  
But check'd by every tie, I may not dare  
To cast a worthless offering at thy shrine,  
Nor ask so dear a breast to feel one pang for mine.  
(II, 30)

While seeming to prohibit the relationship between himself and 'Florence', these lines invite the addressee to cast aside 'every tie' and accept the poet's offering of his 'heart', transgressing social bounds for the sake of all-consuming love (a major theme of Byron's poetry, of course). In identifying herself with the figure of 'Sweet Florence', Lady Falkland falls victim to the poetic power of Byron just as Miss Aubrey is unable to resist Ruthven's 'serpent's art'.

The parallels between the rhetorical powers of their Lordships Ruthven and Byron introduce the first half of my argument in this essay – that in 'The Vampyre' John Polidori uses the trope of vampirism to figure the perceived threat of the Byronic text to its readers, a threat to which women readers were seen to be particularly vulnerable, as is indicated by William Gifford's comment that 'Certain we are, that the most dangerous writer of the present day finds his most numerous and most enthusiastic admirers among the fair sex'.<sup>9</sup> Yet while Polidori uses the trope of vampirism to present

### Polidori's 'The Vampyre', Doubles and the Byronic Imagination

Byronism as feeding off its women readers, his story also reveals that what Annabella Milbanke called 'Byromania' was not simply a matter of the poet's power over passive readers, but a phenomenon in which readers' own imaginations played a crucial role. Ruthven, like the Byronic text, offers a focus for a range of contradictory fantasies of reformation, liberation and identification. While Polidori's short story presents women as the primary victims of the vampire, it is through the feminised figure of the male hero Aubrey that Polidori explores the relationship between the Byronic hero and the role of the imagination. Through Aubrey, Polidori locates the dangerous attractiveness of Byronism in its model of the imagination, and particularly in the idea of imagining as a process of doubling that Byron had articulated in the opening stanzas of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. Polidori's exploration of the link between Byronism and doubling makes 'The Vampyre' itself a significant and early treatment of the theme of the double, examining many of the themes also explored in that other product of the ghost story session, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and anticipating the great double texts of the rest of the nineteenth century including James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Edgar Allan Poe's 'William Wilson' and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

As a fictionalisation of the thrills and dangers of Byronism, Polidori's account of Ruthven's 'power' anticipates modern feminist accounts of the power of romance, such as those offered by Janice Radway and Tania Modleski, that see the genre's appeal in its construction of a seemingly empowering role for women in which they reform the fallen hero, a process with important dimensions of class as well as gender.<sup>10</sup> But what Polidori's tale emphasises is that the fantasy of reformation Ruthven offers Miss Aubrey is indeed only a fantasy, a means of seduction – the 'serpent's art' – which enables the aristocratic male to subjugate (and literally to kill) the middle-class female. Ruthven offers women a role which appears empowering but actually makes victims of them; the narrative ends with the revelation that Miss Aubrey 'had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE' (p. 23). Rather than succumb to the middle-class domesticity offered by Miss Aubrey, Ruthven continues his aristocratic ways (just as Jerome Christensen has argued that Lord Byron's 'strength' was derived from the way he maintained and manipulated his aristocratic status in the face of the rise of commercial society).<sup>11</sup> That Polidori conceived Ruthven as continuing his vampiric ways beyond the close of the text is further suggested by the fact that he considered extending his hero-villain's adventures in a sequel, writing in November 1819 to the publishing house Longman 'to see if they would undertake to buy a second part of the *Vampyre* from me'.<sup>12</sup>

Polidori's eagerness to write a sequel to 'The Vampyre' reveals a willingness to exploit for his own purposes another of the elements of Byronism that he attacks through the metaphor of vampirism in his short story – what Jerome Christensen calls its 'seriality'.<sup>13</sup> As I have suggested, the series of women who are ruined and killed through the course of 'The Vampyre' (and who will continue to be ruined and killed after the end of its narrative) can be read not only as the prey of Ruthven's vampirism or Byron's sexual career but also as the victims of Byronism as a phenomenon that was

perceived to feed off its female readers. The Greek girl Ianthe's account of the vampire as one who is 'forced every year, by feeding upon the life of a lovely female to prolong his existence for the ensuing months' (p. 9) has its parallel in the structure of seemingly compulsive, repetitive publication that characterised Byron's early publishing career with *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the *Oriental Tales*. This pattern of publication has been seen as the 'engine driving [...] the cultural and commercial phenomenon' of Byromania (to quote Christensen),<sup>14</sup> and as stemming from a psychological need within the author himself: for example, in a phrase that itself rewrites the parallel I am exploring, Fiona MacCarthy comments that 'Byron's hunger for celebrity was satisfied, at least temporarily, by publication of *The Giaour*'.<sup>15</sup> Like the vampire, the commercial system of Byronism and the egotism of the poet required their hunger to be repeatedly satisfied through the publication and success of volumes of poetry, and through this process could prolong their existence for the ensuing months.

In 'The Vampyre', then, Polidori not only exposes the techniques by which Byron holds sway over a large portion of his readership, but also presents as vampiric the system of production through which the poet sustains his position in the literary market place. Ruthven's vampirism, like the texts of 'the most dangerous writer of the present day', poses a particular threat to 'the fair sex' and results in the deaths of Ianthe and Miss Aubrey and the ruin of many other women – indeed, the two deaths seem like figurative versions of the wider loss of reputation. However, despite Polidori's desire to demonise Byron, Ruthven is an ambiguous figure who can be seen as potentially liberating as well as corrupting. For example, as Aubrey travels across Italy with his companion, he receives a letter from his guardians which describes how Ruthven's seductions of women has 'hurled [them] from the pinnacle of unsullied virtue, down to the lowest abyss of infamy and degradation' and how, 'since his departure, [they had] thrown even the mask aside, and had not scrupled to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public gaze' (p. 7). What is most striking about this passage is the way it presents the supposed ruination of these women as something more like liberation. Despite the morally condemnatory phrase 'the whole deformity of their vices', the encounter with Ruthven would seem to inspire women to an indulgence of sexuality that is itself presented as natural; it is the socially defined self that is cast aside as 'a mask'. As David Punter has written, 'Ruthven transgresses the social norms, but he does so with the collaboration of his victims; he merely acts as a catalyst for repressed tendencies to emerge into the light of day'.<sup>16</sup>

Like Ruthven, the Byronic text offered women not only the fantasy of the reformation of the hero, but also that of sexual liberation and freedom from the restrictions of social convention. For a number of readers, Byron's poetry enabled them to gain access to or express feelings that they previously had not experienced, as they frequently informed him in their letters.<sup>17</sup> For example, on 5 December 1814, Sarah Agnes Bamber wrote to the poet: 'Sir, I have just finished the perusal of your incomparable works – an impulse grateful as irresistible impels me to acknowledge your Pen has called forth the most exquisite feelings I have ever experienced'.<sup>18</sup> Bamber's

language of sublimated sexual excitement is also heard in MH's letter to Byron of 21 October 1813, in which she informs him that 'upon perusing "Childe Harold" & its accompanying poems' she became 'as it were animated by a new soul, alive to wholly novel sensations and activated by feelings till then unknown'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, when Miss Horatia Somerset acknowledged her need to contact Byron as a result of reading his verse, she did so in the language of sexual succumbing that was to be used by Polidori to explain why Miss Aubrey fell victim to Ruthven ('Who could resist his power?'): 'I can resist no longer, how I could have remained so long silent after reading your poetry astonishes me'.<sup>20</sup> The sexualised nature of the response to Byron's poetry is seen especially clearly in a letter from Susan Ferrier to a friend in which she comments: 'Did you ever read anything so exquisite as the new canto of "Childe Harold"? It is enough to make a woman fly into the arms of a tiger.'<sup>21</sup> According to contemporary accounts, 'Byromania' also led to an abandoning of the social self, akin to the casting aside of the 'mask' described by Polidori. Such behaviour is most often associated with Lady Caroline Lamb, but Fiona MacCarthy (drawing on Samuel Roger's *Table Talk*) shows it to have been a more widespread phenomenon, describing 'the spring and summer season of 1812 when women in particular went "stark mad" about *Childe Harold* and its author' and ridiculing "the manoeuvres of certain noble ladies" [who sought] to gain access to Byron'.<sup>22</sup>

With its hero-villain whose ambiguity parallels the contradictory appeal of Byron, 'The Vampyre' has striking parallels with another text written by a sometime intimate but ultimately rejected acquaintance of Byron, Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon*, published in May 1816. Polidori had read this novel with Byron before writing his own story and drew the name of his own hero-villain from Lamb's fictional version of Byron; one of *Glenarvon's* titles is Clarence de Ruthven. As Frances Wilson has argued in the excellent introduction to her edition of this novel, Byron enabled Lamb 'to escape from passive and "civilized" definitions of femininity' and in *Glenarvon* Lamb examines the 'Byromania' of which she was the most famous sufferer.<sup>23</sup> Like Polidori in 'The Vampyre', Lamb uses her fictional hero-villain to explore Byron's hold over his readers and his followers. *Glenarvon's* power, like Byron's and Ruthven's, arises from his use of language, though in his case in a specifically textual way: he gains his followers as a result of writing a pamphlet addressed to the United Irishmen. As the subject of this pamphlet suggests, Lamb is more interested than Polidori in the politics of Byronism, but she too presents *Glenarvon* as a figure who acts as a catalyst for repressed tendencies to emerge, as is seen in one character's rather hysterical account of his influence:

'Would you credit it [...] can you comprehend it? – that lawless gang – those licentious democrats – those rebellious libertines, have imposed on the inordinate folly of my wife and daughters, who, struck mad, like Agave in the orgies of Bacchus, are running wild about the country, their hair dishevelled [...] and Lady St Clare, to the shame of her sex and me, the property of a recruiting serjeant, employed by one of that nest of serpents at the abbey, to delude others, and all, I believe, occasioned by that arch fiend, *Glenarvon*.'

(p. 111)

Like Ruthven, Glenarvon is ultimately a destructive figure – he tells the heroine Calantha that ‘my love is death’ (p. 229) and all three of the novel’s heroines die following their affairs with him. But his destructiveness is troped not as vampirism but as ‘pestilence’ (p. 112), ‘infection’ (p. 114), ‘disease’ (p. 166) and ‘contagion’ (p. 264). These tropes reveal an important difference in Glenarvon’s effect on his victims from Ruthven’s. Polidori makes no use of what is now a familiar element of the vampire myth – that those bitten by a vampire become vampires themselves (D. L. Macdonald argues that not until *Varney the Vampyre* does this become one of the creature’s essential characteristics in literature, though it is a common idea in folklore).<sup>24</sup> Ruthven’s victims Ianthe and Miss Aubrey are simply killed when Ruthven uses them to glut his thirst (though we might see those women who cast aside ‘the mask’ as being transformed by their encounter with the vampire). By contrast, Lamb’s metaphors of contagion and disease (like those of ‘infection’ that Thomas Love Peacock would use two years later in his attack on Byron in *Nightmare Abbey*)<sup>25</sup> emphasise that the Byronic hero-villain’s danger lies in his transformation of those who come into contact with him (or his text) into a version of himself. In *Glenarvon*, this process of contagion, the transformation of the individual into a replica of his or her idol, is seen most clearly in the figure of St Clare who dresses like her hero and takes on his political role, becoming ‘more Byronic than Glenarvon’, to quote Wilson.<sup>26</sup> However, as Wilson emphasises, Lamb ‘does not blame Byron for the “wrongs of women” or present her heroines as passive victims of an irresistible hero; rather she is concerned ‘with the darker mysteries of the feminine desire that he attracts’.<sup>27</sup> ‘Byron’s danger’, she writes, ‘lay in his enticement to identification, which closely resembled contagion.’<sup>28</sup> In *Glenarvon*, the contagious allure and threat of ‘Byromania’ lies in its power of doubling, of turning the Byromaniac into a version of Byron himself. In the second half of this essay, I want to return to ‘The Vampyre’ to explore how Polidori deals with this association between Byromania and doubling through the relationship of the two male protagonists, Ruthven and Aubrey.

## 2. ‘The Offspring of his Fancy’: Doubling and the Byronic Imagination

John Polidori’s ‘The Vampyre’ is a double text in a number of ways. It doubles Byron’s own unfinished fragment, ‘Augustus Darvell’, adapting the poet’s narrative of two acquaintances travelling across Europe and the death and return from the dead of one of them. It doubles Byron’s own publications, having been first printed in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1819 as ‘A TALE BY LORD BYRON’ (much to the poet’s irritation). In Ruthven (a repetition of Lamb’s divided hero-villain) and Aubrey, it offers doubles of Byron and Polidori themselves. And, as I want to argue now, it can be read as a story of doubling, with the vampire Ruthven as a projection of Aubrey’s repressed desires which he both enacts (in displaced form) and prevents from being enacted through his murder of the object of desire.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, it is Aubrey more than any of the women in the text who becomes the victim of Ruthven’s Byronic role as a catalyst for the emergence of repressed tendencies. As Ken Gelder has shown, the ambivalent nature of this relationship, structured by both antagonism and companionship, can be read in terms

## Polidori's 'The Vampyre', Doubles and the Byronic Imagination

of the homosocial and possibly homosexual dynamics of rivalry and bonding analysed by René Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men*, as well as in relation to Louis Crompton's analysis of Byron's 'queerness' in *Byron and Greek Love*.<sup>30</sup> However, developing my analysis of 'The Vampyre' as an examination of the power dynamics of Byronism, a combination of the rhetoric of Byronic poetics and the reader's processes of imagination, fantasy, desire, projection and identification, I want to argue that Polidori presents the attractiveness of Byronism as a process of imagining as doubling that he derives from Byron's own poetics: through the imaginative creation of the Byronic hero as the double of the self, the Byromaniac is able to 'live / A being more intense', to quote *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III (stanza 6). However, it is also in precisely this power of doubling that the danger of Byronism lies, for it leads to a destabilisation of the self and an unleashing of repressed desires that proves fatal not only to the Byromaniac but also to those he loves.

A wealthy orphan without the benefit of a proper education, Aubrey occupies the place in Gothic fiction normally filled by the heroine. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, he is presented as lacking a mature or realistic understanding of the world as a result of reading romances and having 'cultivated more his imagination than his judgment' (p. 4). The narrator continues: 'He had, hence, that high romantic feeling of honour and candour, which daily ruins so many milliners' apprentices' (p. 4). This comparison to milliners' apprentices whose reading of romances makes them vulnerable to sexual predators feminises Aubrey, suggesting his own susceptibility, and his relationship with Ruthven involves a process of projection that is structured by the forms of fiction:

He [Aubrey] watched him [Ruthven]; [...] [and] allowing his imagination to picture every thing that flattered its propensity to extravagant ideas, he soon formed this object into the hero of a romance, and determined to observe the offspring of his fancy, rather than the person before him. (p. 5)

Like Lamb in *Glenarvon*, Polidori emphasises the extent to which the fascination and glamour of the Byronic hero is as much a result of the imaginative projection of those who view him as it is of any quality inherent within the hero himself. Such a process was central to Byronism and, as James Soderholm among others has shown, it was a process that Byron himself well understood and presented in terms of his hero in *Don Juan*:<sup>31</sup>

with women he was what  
They please to make or take him for; and their  
Imagination's quite enough for that:  
So that the outline's tolerably fair,  
They fill the canvass up – and 'verbum sat.'  
If once their phantasies be brought to bear  
Upon an object, whether sad or playful,  
They can transfigure brighter than a Raphael.  
(XV, 16)

## Simon Bainbridge

Juan, like Ruthven, and Byron himself, provides the outline of the portrait which viewers can fill with their own fantasies.

In determining to observe the 'offspring of his fancy', his own transfigured version of Ruthven, Aubrey commits himself to what can be seen as a particularly Byronic process of imagining, most famously articulated in the poetic manifesto written for the opening of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III in the summer of 1816. Examining his motivations for writing, the poet explains:

'Tis to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now.  
What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,  
Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth  
Invisible but gazing, as I glow  
Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,  
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feeling's dearth.

(III, 6)

Doubling is central to Byronic poetics, as Vincent Newey and Michael O'Neill have suggested in their discussions of this passage,<sup>32</sup> and here Byron specifically represents his imaginative creation as a Doppelgänger (from the German for 'double-goer'), the 'soul of my thought' 'with whom I traverse earth'. By creating, the poet gives life to a second self, a double in which he can 'live / A being more intense'.

Aubrey's imagining of Ruthven, his determination to 'observe the offspring of his fancy', is essentially Byronic: like the poet of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* he endows with form his fancy and sets off to traverse the continent with an imaginary figure – 'a hero of romance' – by his side. However, while Polidori plays on the idea that Ruthven may be a figure of Aubrey's imagination through the majority of the story (and especially after Ruthven's supposed death), the nature of his undertaking in writing 'The Vampyre' meant that he was ultimately committed to a tale of the supernatural. As he explains in his note to the novel *Ernestus Berchtold*, he built his story on the foundations of Byron's fragment 'at the request of a lady, who denied the possibility of such a ground-work forming the outline of a tale which should bear the slightest appearance of probability'.<sup>33</sup> In the face of this challenge, Polidori's ending is unequivocally supernatural as the third-person narrator announces that 'Aubrey's sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPIRE!'. But this ending closes down the ambiguity of the tale which until its final two pages remains open to either a psychological or supernatural reading; as we read the story we remain unsure if the Ruthven we are presented with is the 'offspring' of Aubrey's 'fancy' or the person before him, an effacing of the distinction between imagination and reality that Freud presents as a means through which an uncanny effect is often produced (and that anticipates the reader's uncertainty in texts such as Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Hoffman's 'The Sandman' and Dostoyevsky's *The Double*).<sup>34</sup>

## Polidori's 'The Vampyre', Doubles and the Byronic Imagination

Aubrey's vulnerability to his 'disturbed imagination' is heightened during his time in the East when he is presented as falling victim to the forces of imagination, romance, fairy and the feminine figured in Ianthe and Greece. For example, 'the supernatural tales of her nurse' that Ianthe tells Aubrey, which the narrator dismisses as 'idle and horrible fantasies' (p. 9), associate Eastern folklore with the feminine and the childish, and are opposed to the Western discourse of Aubrey's antiquarianism from which he becomes increasingly distracted. Moreover, Polidori equates this attractive but potentially delusive world of the orientalisised imagination with Byronic romance, representing Ianthe through a series of allusions to Leila in *The Giaour* and naming his heroine after the lyric poem 'To Ianthe' which Byron used as a dedication at the opening of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* from 1814 onwards.

Polidori's emphasis on Aubrey's disturbed imagination and his subjection to delusion creates a radical uncertainty for the reader about, first, whether Ruthven is a vampire, an idea that has its origin during one of Aubrey's periods of delusion ('When [Aubrey] recovered from his delirium he was horrified and startled at the sight of him whose image he had now combined with that of a Vampyre' (p. 13)) and, secondly, whether Ruthven returns from the dead. The ambiguity of Ruthven's return (a return from the dead or a return of the repressed?) is anticipated by the way Polidori presents Aubrey as imagining the form of Ianthe after her murder:

if he sought [solitude] amidst the ruins he had formerly frequented, Ianthe's form stood by his side – if he sought it in the woods, her light step would appear wandering amidst the underwood, in quest of the modest violet; then suddenly turning round would show, to his wild imagination, her pale face and wounded throat with a meek smile upon her lips. (pp. 13–14)

Ruthven's return from the dead is similarly presented as a possible delusion, the product of Aubrey's 'wild imagination'. It occurs when Aubrey accompanies his sister to her first 'drawing room', and is unconfirmed by any other witness:

While he was standing in a corner by himself, heedless of all around him, engaged in the remembrance that the first time he had seen Lord Ruthven was in that very place – he felt himself suddenly seized by the arm, and a voice he recognized too well, sounded in his ear – 'Remember your oath'. He had hardly courage to turn, fearful of seeing a spectre that would blast him, when he perceived, at a little distance, the same figure which had attracted his notice on this spot upon his first entry into society. [...] he could not believe it possible – the dead rise again! – He thought his imagination had conjured up the image his mind was resting upon. (p. 18)

Through much of the story, as here, Polidori presents events from Aubrey's point of view and makes use of free indirect discourse so that the interest of the story becomes focused on Aubrey's mental state rather than the status of Ruthven. It is only in the final four paragraphs of the story, once Aubrey has lapsed into what others perceive as insanity, that the narrator adopts an authentic, objective voice to explain that Ruthven is in fact a vampire.

In 'The Vampyre', then, Polidori meets the authorial challenge of producing a tale based on Byron's fragment which bears the 'appearance of probability' by leaving open for the majority of the story the issue of whether or not the events depicted are supernatural or the product of a 'deluded imagination'. If the story is read psychologically, Ruthven can be seen as Aubrey's double, 'the offspring of his fancy', an imaginative projection of his own desires or elements of the self in what Freud, in 'The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming', sees as a personification of the conflicting trends in the mental life of the hero.<sup>35</sup> Aubrey's relationship with Ruthven is comparable to the more familiar doubling of creator and creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in which Victor describes his creation as 'my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me'.<sup>36</sup>

As a double story, 'The Vampyre' presents a struggle between two opposing parts of the self, with Aubrey's social and moral values and his sense of the real (already weak at the opening of the story) coming increasingly under threat from the transgressive desires and appetites associated with Ruthven and (Byronic) romance (in Freudian terms, the characters could be seen to externalise or embody the social conscience of the super-ego and the instinctual drives of the id). This opposition is structured through discourses of race (West vs. East), gender (masculine vs. feminine) and class (bourgeois vs. aristocracy), and embodied in the genre of the text itself, which oscillates between the realism of the novel and the supernaturalism of romance.<sup>37</sup> Ruthven's link with the idea of the divided self is of course emphasised by his name, pronounced 'Riven' (a pun that anticipates Stevenson's naming of Jekyll's repressed side as 'Hyde').<sup>38</sup> As the narrative of 'The Vampyre' progresses, Aubrey becomes doubly Ruthven, both split in two and increasingly like the figure of his imagined hero.

Aubrey begins this conflict of dualities in the ascendant, foiling Ruthven's seductive schemes in Rome, following which the two men part company. But Ruthven reappears, suggesting the fracture of Aubrey's self, when the latter develops friendships with desirable but socially prohibited females, first the Greek girl Ianthe, and then his own sister, Miss Aubrey. Ianthe is described as 'innocent' and 'infantile', but her erotic arousal of Aubrey is unsettling: 'often would the unconscious girl, engaged in the pursuit of a Kashmere butterfly, show the whole of beauty of her form [...] to the eager gaze of him, who forgot the letters he had just deciphered upon an almost effaced tablet, in the contemplation of her sylph-like figure' (p. 9). One night, upon returning from an archaeological expedition, Aubrey discovers Ianthe being attacked by a mysterious creature in a hut, and his intervention re-enacts that in Rome; the mysterious figure cries out 'again baffled' (p. 12), revealing himself to be Ruthven. The subsequent struggle, strongly suggestive of a battle between conscience and desire, is this time won by Ruthven, who kills Ianthe by tearing out her throat. This incident is again presented from Aubrey's point of view and unseen by anyone else, and when others arrive they find only the corpse of Ianthe and the motionless Aubrey who hopes that the dead body lying beside him is 'but a vision arising from his disturbed imagination' (p. 12), prompting the reader to question Aubrey's grasp of reality.

Following Ianthe's death, Aubrey and Ruthven again part, this time on a seemingly permanent basis as a result of Ruthven's death. However, at this point in the story double motifs proliferate as Aubrey feels himself 'haunted' by Ruthven's smile and even starts to become like him: 'He was now as much a lover of solitude and silence as Lord Ruthven' (p. 13). Ruthven returns from the dead at precisely the moment Aubrey re-establishes his relationship with this sister. As with Ianthe, Aubrey's relationship is with a woman sexually unattainable within the laws of social convention, though Miss Aubrey, who is just entering society, is on the point of moving from a position of innocence to one of sexual knowledge: 'If she before, by her infantine caresses, had gained [Aubrey's] affection, now that the woman began to appear, she was still more attaching as a companion' (p. 17). Ruthven's killing of Miss Aubrey, like that of Ianthe, can be seen as a displaced enactment of Aubrey's own possessive and prohibited desire and a forestalling of any actual enactment through death. As Webber argues of the *Doppelgänger* more generally, it 'represents, but also appropriates and diverts, subjective desire': 'the *Doppelgänger* is characteristically at once permissive and prohibitive, both a vicarious agent and a frustrating usurper of the subject's pleasures'.<sup>39</sup> Ruthven's killing of Miss Aubrey both causes Aubrey's death and is symbolic of Ruthven's victory over him within the structures of doubling. Aubrey becomes Ruthven just as Mr Hyde's driving of Dr Jekyll from his own body prompts his suicide.

John Polidori's 'The Vampyre' is important not only as a pivotal text in the literature of vampirism but also as an examination of the nature of Byronism, a critique of the Romantic imagination comparable to *Frankenstein* and an early example of the double narrative that would develop through the nineteenth century. Like Caroline Lamb in *Glenarvon*, Polidori shows that the attraction of the Byronic hero-villain figure stems from the way it enables a projection of the self and provides a release for repressed tendencies, though the two writers deal with this process differently in relation to gender. In 'The Vampyre' women are essentially victims of Ruthven's Byronic rhetoric, while it is the (albeit feminised) Aubrey who actively creates the hero who fascinates him. In *Glenarvon*, Lamb presents this doubling process as a response that is open to women as well as men, and she herself enacted it when forging Byron's letters and writing 'A New Canto' of *Don Juan*.<sup>40</sup> However, just as in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in which the repressed side of the self, once released, comes to dominate, so in both these texts the self becomes the Byronic figure it had imagined. While Byromania stimulates creativity and promises liberation, it also threatens to destroy the Byromaniac's sense of self by transforming the subject into the figure of its own imaginings.

The textual history of 'The Vampyre' articulates the power of Byronism as a process of doubling at another level, for despite Polidori's intended demonisation of his former employer, the story was published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1819 as 'A TALE BY LORD BYRON' and continued to be widely considered as by Byron regardless of the protests of both poet and actual author: Goethe, for

example, regarded the story as Byron's masterpiece.<sup>41</sup> 'The Vampyre' falls victim to the very process it analyses; seeking to identify and reform the nature of Byronic power, Polidori's tale becomes a Byronic text, transformed into the double of what it imagines. Like Aubrey, and his sister, Polidori proves unable to resist his Lordship's power. However, even while losing his own authorial identity, in determining to observe the offspring of his fancy Polidori creates one of the most enduring figures of popular fiction and gives to the Byronic hero the form in which it maintains its strongest presence in the modern imagination.<sup>42</sup>

Lancaster University



- 1 John Polidori, 'The Vampyre', in *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, ed. Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 7. This edition uses the text printed in the *New Monthly Magazine*. Further references are given within parentheses in the main text. On the links between Byron and Polidori and between Byron and Ruthven, see D. L. Macdonald, *Poor Polidori: A Critical Biography of the Author of 'The Vampyre'* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 177–203.
- 2 This argument is particularly well made by Caroline Franklin in 'Cosmopolitan Masculinity and the British Female Reader of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*', in Richard A. Cardwell (ed.), *Lord Byron the European: Essays from the International Byron Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), pp. 105–25. Other valuable studies of Byron's relationship with his readers include: Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); James Soderholm, *Fantasy, Forgery, and the Byron Legend* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996); Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ghislaine McDayter, "'Consuming the Sublime": Gothic Pleasure and the Construction of Identity', *Woman's Writing: The Elizabethan to the Victorian Period*, 2 (1995), pp. 55–75 and 'Conjuring Byron: Byromania, Literary Commodification and the Birth of Celebrity', in Frances Wilson (ed.), *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 43–62; Corin Throsby, 'Flirting with Fame: Byron's Anonymous Female Fans', *The Byron Journal*, 32:2 (2004), pp. 115–23. For a more general account, see William St Clair, 'The Impact of Byron's Writings: An Evaluative Approach', in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: Augustan and Romantic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1–25.
- 3 Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002), p. 227.
- 4 See Soderholm, *Fantasy, Forgery, and the Byron Legend*, passim.
- 5 For details of Lady Falkland's correspondence, see Leslie A. Marchand, "'Come to me, my adored boy, George": Byron's Ordeal with Lady Falkland', *The Byron Journal*, 16 (1988), pp. 21–28.
- 6 Marchand, 'Byron's Ordeal', p. 23.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Quoted in George Paston and Peter Quennell, *'To Lord Byron': Feminine Profiles based upon unpublished letters 1807–1824* (London: John Murray, 1939), p. 20.
- 9 'Mrs Hemans's Poems', *Quarterly Review*, 24 (1820), p. 131. Ghislaine McDayter has suggestively commented that Ruthven is 'a monster who feeds upon the adoration of his followers only to destroy them, and it is clear that Polidori is thereby commenting upon Byron's relationship not only with his readers, but also with Polidori himself' ('Conjuring Byron', p. 55).
- 10 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced*

## Polidori's 'The Vampyre', Doubles and the Byronic Imagination

- Fantasies for Women* (Methuen: London, 1984). For analysis of the treatment of the Byronic hero in later romance forms, see the essays by Andrew Elfenbein ('Silver-Fork Byron and the Image of Regency England') and Roger Sales ('The Loathsome Lord and the Disdainful Dame: Byron, Cartland and the Regency Romance') in Wilson (ed.), *Byromania*, pp. 77–92, 166–83.
- 11 Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
  - 12 Macdonald, *Poor Polidori*, p. 173.
  - 13 *Lord Byron's Strength*, p. 5.
  - 14 *Ibid.*
  - 15 MacCarthy, *Byron*, p. 199.
  - 16 David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London and New York: Longman, 1980), p. 118.
  - 17 For a valuable discussion of women readers' letters to Byron, see Throsby, 'Flirting with Fame'.
  - 18 Quoted in MacCarthy, *Byron*, p. 162.
  - 19 *Ibid.*
  - 20 *Ibid.*
  - 21 *Memoirs and Correspondence of Susan Ferrier, 1782–1854*, ed. John A. Doyle (London: John Murray, 1898), p. 131.
  - 22 MacCarthy, *Byron*, p. 161.
  - 23 Lady Caroline Lamb, *Glenarvon*, ed. Frances Wilson (London: Everyman, 1995), p. xx.
  - 24 *Poor Polidori*, p. 201.
  - 25 Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey/Crotchet Castle*, ed. Raymond Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 77.
  - 26 *Glenarvon*, p. xxx.
  - 27 *Ibid.*, pp. xx, xxiv.
  - 28 *Ibid.*, p. xxi.
  - 29 In the introduction to their edition of 'The Vampyre', D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf comment that 'Strongmore [Polidori's name for Ruthven in later editions] may be Aubrey's double; there may be a terrible appropriateness in his preying on the women Aubrey loves', but they do not develop their discussion beyond this fascinating suggestion ('*The Vampyre*' and '*Ernestus Berchtold; or, The Modern Oedipus*': *Collected Fiction of John William Polidori* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 7). 'The Vampyre' fulfils all the premises that Andrew J. Webber offers as a theory of the literary double in his major study of the subject, *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) pp. 3–5.
  - 30 Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 58–60. See also Webber's examination of the dyadic scheme of the Doppelgänger and the triangulation of desire (*The Doppelgänger*, p. 18).
  - 31 *Fantasy, Forgery and the Byron Legend*, p. 7.
  - 32 Vincent Newey, 'Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold* III and IV', in Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (eds), *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp. 148–90; O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 113–14.
  - 33 '*The Vampyre*', ed. Macdonald and Scherf, p. 52.
  - 34 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 228
  - 35 For a discussion of Freud and the double, see Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).
  - 36 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (1818 Text)*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford: World's Classics, 1994), p. 57.
  - 37 On the story's genre, see Carol A. Senf, 'Polidori's *The Vampyre*: Combining the Gothic with Realism', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 56:1 (1988), pp. 197–208.
  - 38 As mentioned above, Polidori took the name Ruthven from Lamb's *Glenarvon*, but *Glenarvon* is himself a riven figure, split between the two identities of Clarence de Ruthven and Viviani.

## Simon Bainbridge

- 39 *The Doppelgänger*, pp. 13 and 8. See also Mladen Dolar's argument that the double both frustrates the subject and 'realizes the subject's hidden or repressed desires so that he does things he would never dare to do or that his conscience wouldn't let him do' ("I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny', *October*, 58 (1991), pp. 5-23 (p. 11)).
- 40 See Soderholm, *Fantasy, Forgery, and the Byron Legend*, pp. 40-69.
- 41 Macdonald, *Poor Polidori*, p. 190.
- 42 On vampire fiction as 'perhaps the most varied and enduring of all the varied expressions of Byronism', see Tom Holland, 'Undead Byron', in Wilson (ed.), *Byromania*, pp. 154-65 (p. 155).



#### COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Lord Ruthven's Power: Polidori's 'The Vampyre',  
Doubles and the Byronic Imagination  
SOURCE: Byron J 34 no1 2006

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
[http://www.byronsociety.org/bsa/byron\\_journal.html](http://www.byronsociety.org/bsa/byron_journal.html)