

An English Romantic in Greece: Byron's Starry Skies

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Abstract. Following on from the welcome to Greece and introduction, the connections with Greece of the English Romantic poet and Philhellene, Lord Byron, are considered in the context of the contrast between Byron's upbringing in the British Isles and his love for the Mediterranean, particularly Greece. It is argued that astronomical references in many of his works, especially his famous poem 'She Walks in Beauty like the Night', were inspired by his love of Greece and time spent there, rather than his earlier years in London and the north of Scotland. This short piece developed out of my introductory comments made as Chair of INSAP, in order to introduce a Greek-themed topic at the same time as putting forward the idea of astronomical influence on Lord Byron as a leading Romantic poet.

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light

Written in June 1812, Byron's poem, *She walks in beauty* has been extensively analysed and discussed, but few comments (if any) have been made about the astronomical references included here, and indeed in Byron's other vast poetic output. It is argued here that the inspiration for such allusions to the dark night sky and bright day, written *after* his extensive visits to Greece, came from his love for the clear skies of Greece rather than his English homeland – let alone his formative years in the dark and wet north of Scotland.

Lord Byron was notorious for his scandalous behaviour and also for his escapades in the Mediterranean and in Greece in particular. He championed liberty in his poetry and written works and also in his deeds, giving money, time, energy and finally his life to support the Greek War of Independence from Ottoman domination (1823–27). Lord George

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Gordon Byron is uniquely positioned as an English Poet who became a Greek National Hero. In fact, it is highly unusual for anyone to become such a national hero in a country that is not his/her own.



Fig. 1. Statue of Lord Byron, Achilleion Palace, Corfu. (Photo: V Shrimplin)

Born in London on 22 January 1788, Byron spent most of his early childhood in Aberdeen in the very north of Scotland, where his mother, a Scottish heiress, took him in summer 1789. His father was largely absent and died in 1791 so, after his great-uncle died in 1798, the ten-year-old George Gordon Byron succeeded to the family baronetcy and inherited the family seat at Newstead Abbey, near Nottingham.¹ Apart from spending time at Newstead, Byron studied at Harrow school (1801–05) and Trinity College Cambridge (1805–08), and also spent time in the fashionable hotspots of London and Brighton.²

¹ Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2014), p.6.

² For Byron's early life in England, see MacCarthy, *Byron*, Chapters 1-7.

On achieving his majority and assured financial independence at the age of 21 in 1809, he undertook a 'Grand Tour' of Europe 1809–11, as was customary for the sons of the aristocracy. Avoiding war-torn France of the Napoleonic era, his travels led him first to Portugal and Spain (July–September 1809) and then further afield to Western Greece (Patras, Kefalonia and Zakynthos), meeting the Turkish Ali Pasha at Ioannina. Travelling via Delphi and Thebes, he rode into Athens on Christmas Eve 1809, where he relished the 'azure skies' as a contrast to the dismal winter darkness of Aberdeen.³ He became aware of ideas of Greek independence from the Turks, and also bitterly opposed Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles from the Acropolis.⁴ Travelling northwards, he famously swam across the Hellespont before staying in Constantinople (May–July 1810) where he was both fascinated by the Turkish way of life and shocked by their cruelty.

Returning to Athens in July 1810, he wrote to his mother 'You northern gentry can have no conception of a Greek summer'⁵ showing the huge impression made upon him by the climate and clear skies of Greece – which was to become highly significant for his interest in the 'starry skies and cloudless climes' of the area. After further time spent in Athens and the Peloponnese he arrived back in England in July 1811, having spent almost two years in Greece.

During his time in England, 1811–16, he became further embroiled in a number of scandals (mainly centred on London and Cheltenham), and left England again after less than 5 years – little knowing that he was never to return. Travelling via Switzerland (Geneva and the Alps), Byron spent the best part of the years 1817 to 1822 in Italy before travelling to Greece again in 1823.⁶ This time he stayed mainly in Ioannina, Kephallonia and finally Missolonghi where he died of a fever on 19 April 1824, aged just 36. He thus spent a huge amount of his short life in the Mediterranean and

³ Aberdeen is even now noted for its high incidence of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) (MacCarthy, *Byron*, p.11). John M Eagles, Jane E. Andrew, Samantha Wileman et al, 'Seasonal affective disorder and social deprivation in Aberdeen' *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 70, no.3 (2002): pp.337–40 where it is also shown that SAD is more common among more affluent socioeconomic groups.

⁴ Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, line 1027. Byron defaced some monuments himself, for example by inscribing his signature on the temple of Poseidon at Sounion. See also, MacCarthy, *Byron*, pp.112–13.

⁵ Letter to Catherine Gordon Byron, 20 July 1810, cited by MacCarthy, *Byron*, p.125.

⁶ MacCarthy, *Byron*, Chapters 18–23.

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only five years of his adult life in England – a similar amount to the number of years he lived in Greece. Notorious in his own lifetime for his tumultuous love affairs, inappropriate relationships, unpaid debts and illegitimate children, he was the ‘original hearthrob’ – famously described by Lady Caroline Lamb in her journal as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know”.⁷

A celebrity for many reasons other than scandals, Byron's devotion to Greece arose out of his fervour for Classical Greek art, architecture and philosophy. It was outwardly expressed in his support for the cause of Greek Independence, as shown by his frequent depiction in Greek costume. He raised an army there at his own expense, and even became the Commander-in-Chief (*Archistrategos*) of the Greek forces in Western Greece.⁸ Uniting Greece against the enemy, he gained support for its struggle in London via the London Philhellenic Committee, established to support the Greeks in their struggle for independence from Ottoman rule. With Byron's patronage and support, they raised funds to provide support for the fledgling Greek Government and for the provision of military equipment. In particular, Byron helped galvanise other European nations to assist Greece in its liberation from the Ottoman Turks, achieved in October 1827 when British, French and Russian forces destroyed the Turkish fleet at Navarino, assuring Greek independence. Byron did not live to see the Greeks obtain their freedom and the tragedy of his early death was summed up by the national poet of Greece, Dionysios Solomos, in his poem *To the Death of Lord Byron* which added to the national mourning.⁹

Lord Byron's early years and later travels and activities (as summarised above) are key to an understanding of his poetry, and in particular for allusions to astronomical phenomena in his poetry. As cited in the introduction above, his most famous individual poem ‘She Walks in Beauty, Like the Night’ is remarkable for its astronomical references, especially in the first of its three stanzas. Significantly, Byron wrote the poem during his trip back to England in 1811–1816, after spending almost two years in Greece. On 11 June 1814, at a dinner party in London, he met Mrs Anne Wilmot, the wife of his first cousin, Sir Robert Wilmot. Struck by her unusual beauty, he wrote the poem the very next day. A contemporary witness to the event records that Mrs Wilmot was actually dressed in black that evening: ‘in mourning with numerous spangles in her

⁷ MacCarthy, *Byron*, p.164.

⁸ MacCarthy, *Byron*, p.496.

⁹ Byron (Βύρων) remains a popular boy's name in Greece.

dress'.¹⁰ Inspired by the stars, Byron drew an analogy with the beauty of 'cloudless climes and starry skies'. He emphasised the theme of clear skies and star-lit nights – and the tender light at night which he contrasts with 'gaudy day'. Whilst it is true that 'Dark Skies' which showed up the stars were better in London at the time than in the twenty-first century, it seems far more likely that, when he wrote those lines, Byron was thinking of his days in the Mediterranean and in Greece in particular.

Having grown up in Aberdeen in the North of Scotland, with intensely cloudy skies full of perpetual mist, rain and winter darkness, and then living in the South of England, especially London, Byron seems to have developed a lifelong craving for the sun. 'Gaudy' is not a word that is often (if ever) used to describe a sunny day in England. The weather was notoriously bad in London in the period 1814–16 and the year 1816 was actually known as the *Year Without a Summer*, being the coldest recorded 1766–2000.¹¹ An anonymous contemporary watercolour painting of the celebrations on 1 August 1814 in St James's Park, London, shows how cloudy and dull the weather was – not the 'cloudless climes and starry skies' nor the 'gaudy day' of Byron's poem.¹² In addition, he refers to 'climes' on many occasions elsewhere in his poetry (for example '*distant climes*'; '*scorching climes*'; '*rugged climes*') and these always refer to exotic distant lands. They are not used in the context of London or even the British Isles.¹³ Byron's poem was clearly inspired not only by astronomical phenomena; but also by his reminiscences of Greece.

¹⁰ In a note to a letter of Byron's dated 11 June 1814, Wedderburn Webster wrote: 'I did take him to Lady Sitwell's party ... He there for the first time saw his cousin, the beautiful Mrs Wilmot who had appeared in mourning with numerous spangles in her dress.' *Letters*, 1899, iii. 92, note 1

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21811/21811-h/21811-h.htm#Footnote_287.

¹¹ According to the Central England Temperature (CET) which charts temperature statistics from 1659, Spring & Summer 1812 were very cold, particularly March, April, June, July & August. It was the coldest Spring since 1799 and May, June and July were all very wet. The summer of 1812 was one of the coldest summers in England, and had a severe effect on crops, resulting in serious food shortages. <https://premium.weatherweb.net/weather-in-history-1800-to-1849->.

¹² *The Effect Previous to Discovering the Illuminated Temple of Peace and Concord in St. James's Park*, London, August 1, 1814 (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/341744>).

¹³ For example, 'distant climes' in the poem *Farewell to a lady* (Byron, *Major Works*, p.1); 'those climes where I have late been staying', *Childe Harold, Introduction* (Byron, *Major Works*, p.21); 'scorching climes beyond the sea',

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The contention that Byron's famous poem was inspired by his experience of astronomy and Greek night skies is also supported by references to astronomical phenomena elsewhere in his poetry. For example, his poem 'To Thyrza' was written as Byron heard of the death of his dear friend John Edleston, while travelling back from Greece in 1811:

On many a lone and lovely night
It sooth'd to gaze upon the sky
For then I deem'd the heavenly light/
Shone sweetly on thy pensive eye¹⁴

Clearly, Byron's contemplation of the heavenly night skies brought him comfort. By contrast, in his poem 'Darkness' (1816) written in England, he wrote of his horror and anguish at feeling the sun had been extinguished, and the stars just wandered in space – a possible reference to the contrast in climate:

Darkness, 1816

I had a dream, which was not all a dream...
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space
Rayless and pathless, in the moonless air.¹⁵

Byron's interest in astronomical phenomena is also shown by references in his epic poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (henceforth CH) – an autobiographical saga about his own travels and adventures which he started writing while in Ioannina in October 1809. In canto III (written 1812–18), Byron eulogises, 'Ye stars! Which are the poetry of heaven!' (CH III, 88) and in a later canto (CH IV, 27–28), 'The Moon is up,' he writes ... 'A Single Star is at her side, and reigns/With her o'er half the lovely heaven.' Given the known date of writing (20 August 1817), it has been suggested that the brilliant 'star' was likely to have been the planet

Childe Harold I, 6 (Byron, *Major Works*, p. 24); 'rugged clime' [of the Pindus mountain] *Childe Harold* II, 46 (Byron, *Major Works*, p.66).

¹⁴ Byron, *Major Works*, p.17. Edleston had been Byron's close friend since they were students at Cambridge.

¹⁵ Byron, *Major Works*, p.272. Byron's famous poem, 'So, we'll go no more a-roving' also seems to be inspired by celestial bodies of the night: 'Though the night was made for loving/And the day returns too soon,/ Yet we'll go no more a roving/By the light of the moon. Byron, *Major Works*, p.315.

Jupiter, showing Byron's acute observations of the celestial phenomenon. Later on, in the same canto of *Childe Harold*, he refers to 'The starry fable of the milky way ...' (CH IV, 151).¹⁶

In his other great epic poem, *Don Juan* of 1819-21 (henceforth DJ), Byron continues to show interest in celestial phenomena, and his contemplation of the creation of the universe:

He thought about himself and the whole earth,
Of man the wonderful and of the stars
And how the deuce they ever could have birth (DJ I, 92)

He even humorously considers Galileo and how,

Great Galileo was debarred the Sun
Because he fixed it ...
But now it seems, he's right – his notion just
No doubt a consolation to his dust (DJ XVII, 8)¹⁷

More scientifically, Byron's fascination with astronomical phenomena is also confirmed by his interest in the work of William and Caroline Herschel. He had shown an interest in the Herschel view of the universe, and their use of a reflecting telescopes while he was still at Cambridge. In fact, he twice visited the Herschels at their 'Observatory House' in Slough, on 24 September 1811 (just a few months before he wrote 'She walks in Beauty') and again on 10 June 1813, as recorded in their Visitors' Book. The book is now in the Caird Library of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.¹⁸ As Effinger points out, the specific details of the visits provide corroborating evidence in lieu of previously vague references that Byron visited the Herschels. This 'yields greater insights into Byron's

¹⁶ Byron, *Major Works*, respectively p.130, p.156, p.191. And see: Donald Olson, 'The Moon Is Up ... A Single Star Is at Her Side' in *Sky & Telescope*, Vol. 134, Issue 2, pp. 68–74, August 2017; also Jayme Blaschke 'Celestial Sleuth identifies Lord Byron's stellar inspiration', www.physics.org, 28 June 2017 (<https://phys.org/news/2017-06-celestial-sleuth-lord-byron-stellar.html>).

¹⁷ Respectively, p.401 and p.877.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Effinger, 'A Note on Lord Byron's Visits to William and Caroline Herschel', March 2020, [Notes and Queries](https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/67/1/89/5634178) vol. 67, number 1 (March 2020) p. 89. (Downloaded from <https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/67/1/89/5634178> on 27 December 2020).

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interests in both astronomy and the Herschels than has been previously acknowledged.'

Later on, in his *Detached Thoughts* (number 100), Byron observed that, 'The Night is also a religious concern – and even more so – when I viewed the Moon and Stars through Herschel's telescope – and saw that they were worlds'.¹⁹ He also made a point of observing the annular eclipse of the sun at Filetto near Ravenna on 7 Sept 1820. In 1822, he made the amazing observation that: 'I suppose we shall soon travel by air vessels, make air instead of sea voyages and at length find our way to the moon, and that 'We are at present in the infancy of Science'.²⁰ His only legitimate child was Ada Lovelace, an early pioneer of computer technology, working with Charles Babbage in the 1840s. Significantly, a crater on Mercury was named after Byron by the IAU in 1976.²¹



Fig. 2. Byron Memorial Statue, Garden of Heroes, Missolonghi. (Photo: Dinah Jasensky)

¹⁹ Byron, *Major Works*, p. 1017.

²⁰ Cited by MacCarthy, *Byron* p.70.

²¹ <https://planetarynames.wr.usgs.gov/Feature/944>

The famous painting of *Lord Byron on his Death-bed* by Joseph Dionysius Odevaere (1826) features the Greek word for freedom ελευθερία (eleftheria), which epitomises the way in which he supported Greece in its struggle for independence.²² Some of his most important works are also listed in roundels in the painting. His memorial at Missolonghi also reflects his passion for Greece and support for their liberation (Fig. 2).

It could be claimed that he was as important as a freedom-fighter as a poet, yet the two were inextricably linked. He wrote, 'If I am a poet, the air of Greece has made me one'. His poem 'She walks in beauty like the Night of cloudless climes and starry skies' must have been inspired, not only by the beauty of his cousin's wife, but also by the astronomical phenomena, and by Greece. As elsewhere in his poetry, he demonstrates a nostalgia and longing for Greece. Byron had a marked effect on Greece but Greece and Greek skies also had a marked effect on Lord Byron. Inspired by Greece, he was also inspired by astronomy, recognising, as he said, that 'there is that within me which shall tire Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire' (Childe Harold, canto 4).

²² https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lord_Byron_on_his_Death-bed_c._1826.jpg .