***Lord Byron: Mad, bad, and, now, essential to know***

Forget what you think you know about the Romantic poet. His life and work are more relevant to us now than ever.

Byron had courage. In an era when you could be humiliated in the stocks or even hanged for homosexuality, Byron dared to write about his own same-sex affairs. He wrote poems about schoolboy friendship. He wrote about an unmentionable secret that afflicted the eponymous hero of “Childe Harold,” his first work to reach a large audience. Byron later got over his sadness and joked about how commonplace homosexualitywas in classical literature. This didn’t make him less self-conscious about his own effeminacy. Yet he also possessed the bravery to be painted in portraits with his sensual red lips and a woman’s jewel at his neck.

Byron also loved women. Inspired by the shimmering skirt of a woman’s mourning dress, he wrote “She walks in beauty as the night.” Byron needed courage here too. When his marriage to Lady Byron broke up, London’s rumor mill drove him into exile. He admitted the wrong he’d done to others by writing “I have been cunning in mine overthrow, the careful pilot of my proper woe.” In Italy he found Teresa Guiccioli, his last great love. They were together for only a few years, but these were among the happiest of his life.

We now struggle against the reimposition of bans on gay books. We also confront hostility to people with different expressions of gender. Byron’s audacity makes us see how a love lived ashamed and in secret may not only harm a lone sufferer but also hurt the whole society that drives that person into hiding. Britain certainly lost one of its greatest talents by making Byron feel he must flee.

All of us suffer from boredom. We may experience our routines as heavy and dull. Byron helps us vault out of that to achieve something better. We can realize a more ardent and more exciting life by sitting down first to create it on the page. Byron wrote in the very first months of his exile “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.” Byron’s “as I do now” invites us living two centuries after his death to enter his world and to explore the possibilities for a more thrillingly fulfilled life along with him, almost as if he were sitting next to us.

Another of Byron’s “as I do” moments occurred in the water. He hated his deformed foot. It forced him to limp. In the water he was free. It was the only place where he could move with power and grace. This led him to marathon swims of tidal rivers in Britain and Portugal. He also swam across the strait at the Mediterranean entrance to Istanbul. Byron put his hand on a wave and suddenly made a connection. He realized that this hand was also his writing hand. His ease with pen and paper was what he also felt in the water. The water removedhis deformity. Writing not only eliminatedhis boredom and his ostracism, it transformed them into fine works of narrative and verse.

He lived fast, jilted many lovers, burned his candle at both ends, and died young. He’s the only great writer in history best known by the epigram of a rejected lover. Caroline Lamb said he was “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” What if, in this year that marks 200 years since his death, Byron is not dangerous but essential for us to know?

Byron was a contemporary of George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Jane Austen. He was born with a deformed right foot. Because a cannonball killed his cousin in the Napoleonic wars, Byron inherited a title and a fortune at the age of 10. Before he was out of his 20s he’d written best-selling books about his travels in the eastern Mediterranean. By his 30s he’d produced his masterpiece, “Don Juan,” with “Juan” pronounced “joo-un.” He was in Greece helping to fund the fight for independence from Turkey when he died aged only 36. The accuracy of historical autopsies is hard to judge, but his doctors probably killed Byron by bleeding him to death.

Although Byron is less read now, in his lifetime and long afterward Byron was a superstar. Prominent Bostonians loved him. Isabella Stewart Gardner collected Byron’s letters, including a forgery, as well as a miniature portrait of him. Henry Davis Sleeper, who designed interiors for Joan Crawford in Hollywood, devoted a whole room to Byron at Beauport, his house near Gloucester. Sleeper was probably gay and may have been drawn to Byron’s love life. Indeed, Byron’s sexuality is one of the first ways he shines necessary light on our lives now.

The great advance of “Don Juan,” late in Byron’s career, was his embrace of a comic and conversational voice, very different from the blighted hero of “Childe Harold.” In “Don Juan” Byron wrote that he was once considered himself “the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.” He expected readers to laugh at the exaggeration. In “[Beppo,](http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/george-gordon-byron/beppo-a-venetian-story-10628)” penned atabout the same time, Byron made fun of himself as a former Regency notable, gorgeously dressed, forced to leave London where he was toast of the town. Now he wasreduced to being “an aging dandy lately on his travels.” A British officer who stopped to visit Byron in Greece near the end of Byron’s life remembered this good humor. Byron said he didn’t know how the Greek expedition would turn out*,* but, glancing at his bad foot, said he could be counted on not to run.

This is a last way to find contemporary relevance in Byron’s life and work. To learn the details of a past life is to gain a yardstick to measure and the means to inspire ourselves in the present. Try reading “Beppo” yourself. It’s one of Byron’s best, shorter poems. His daring as a lover, his inventing a life for himself on the page, and his laughter at his own expense are compelling ways of making us renew and reenvision our lives too.

*William Kuhn is the author of several works of biography and fiction. He latest book is “*[*Swimming With Lord Byron*](https://www.williamkuhn.com/disc.htm)*.”*