

“AS THUS TO VARIETIE INCLIN’D”: DRAYTON, BYRON, AND LAUREATESHIP

by

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(Under the Direction of Coburn Freer)

ABSTRACT

This study considers the history of laureateship and the relevance of laureate self-presentation on the poetry of Michael Drayton (in *Idea*) and George Gordon, Lord Byron (in *Don Juan*). I consider how these poets use the gestures of stable, centered laureate identity to legitimize their poetry, but rely upon strategies of unstable poetic voice and narrative progression to provoke engagement with their work. When conventions and formulae threaten to render the articulation of individual authority meaningless, Drayton and Byron both seek recourse to the advantages of rapidly unfolding variety, within the conceptual framework of self-styled stable poetic identity.

INDEX WORDS: laureate, laureateship, Drayton, sonnet, *Idea*, Byron, *Don Juan*

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DEDICATION

In memory of Cynthia Marshall

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I thank my parents, Mark and Cindy Ulevich, for their unwavering patience and support. Two decades after a fateful encounter with a bedtime storybook, I have undertaken to study two poets who also understood the importance of “reading it the way it’s printed.”

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Introduction

Your judiciall eye must modell forth what my penne hath layd together [...]

—and know,
'Tis not enough to spell, or even to read,
To constitute a reader [...]

This is a study of two poets who, in spite of their numerous dissimilarities in self-presentation—dissimilarities extreme enough to prompt the reasonable question how these poets might be comparable at all—nevertheless both persistently occupy a place in laureate history. They claim the spotlight for brief intervals, frequently under the banner of supplying synchronic context for their contemporaries' ambitions, and the comparison is usually roundly unflattering to someone,³ whether an official laureate or a poet setting himself up in direct opposition to the post. Both Michael Drayton and Lord Byron are particularly valuable figures by which to consider the history of

¹ From Drayton's dedication to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, printed before the epistle of Rosamond to Henry II in *Englands Heroicall Epistles*; 5:103. All citations from Drayton refer to the *Works*, eds. Hebel, Tillotson, and Newdigate; references to the sonnets will be made clear in context.

² *Don Juan*, XIII.73. I cite cantos in Roman numerals and then the stanza in Arabic numerals.

³ This is especially true of the accounts from the first half of the twentieth century. The three major studies I have considered are Walter Hamilton, *The Poets Laureate of England* (1879); Edmund Broadus, *The Laureateship: A Study of Poet Laureate in England with some account of the Poets* (1921); and Kenneth Hopkins, *The Poets Laureate* (1955). In general, Hopkins treats the idea of laureate ambition more evenhandedly than Hamilton or Broadus, but he also confines his discussion primarily to the history of the official post.

laureateship, and I hope to illustrate their relevance to this tradition without recourse to any “successes” or “failures” of laureates, official or otherwise. Indeed, my aim here is specifically to avoid considering laureateship in light of categorization. Rather, I wish to suggest that, both before and after the appointment of John Dryden, the first official laureate, laureateship is most fruitfully considered as a nexus of preoccupations with self-presentation and authority—concerns that some poets more than others felt obliged to address, whether or not they held the official post.

Drayton and Byron both express keen interest in those laureate concerns, and this seems to invite consideration of their works with respect to laureateship as a system of ambitions and (perceived) obligations. I propose to explore the uses Drayton and Byron make of laureate tradition and identity, and how that tradition influences one of each poet’s long-term, revised projects: Drayton’s sonnet sequence *Idea*, begun as *Ideas Mirrour* in 1594 and included after many revisions in his 1619 folio of collected works; and Byron’s *Don Juan*, the first two cantos of which were published in 1819 and which stops, though it hardly concludes, at Byron’s death in 1824.

Perhaps the most important facet of laureate identity to which I would like to call attention here is the presentation of a stable, authoritative, and recognizable poetic identity.⁴ My attention, that is, centers firmly on poetic self-presentation, but not simply because doing so permits a comparison between a poet who lived half a century before the post became official and a poet who was content to call the office the

⁴ For this idea, and for insight into laureate self-presentation throughout this work, I am indebted to Richard Helgerson’s *Self-Crowned Laureates*.

“laureate’s sty” (X.13). Rather, I particularly wish to emphasize the “attempt to maintain an ethically normative and unchanging self” (Helgerson 9) as a means of contrast. With stability as an ideal, uncertainty and contingency become the realities (both experiential and poetic) that especially clash with laureate identity. Drayton and Byron write—and keep coming back to—poems that meditate on the subjection of poet and poetry to elements of uncontrollability and inconstancy. If these are the vulnerable, or at least touchy, points in their poetic sensibilities, the shaping of their responses is well worth a look.

I.
Laureate Context

The history of laureateship does not suffer from a lack of scholarly attention. A number of books from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exclusively treat the laureate office, and many briefer studies have been made through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Quite recently, however, Robert J. Meyer-Lee observes that “the story of the poet laureate has not yet been fully told” (688): but to attend to that incompleteness does not require simply a more extensive taxonomy of laureate criteria.

Scholars who have set out to recount only the history of the pensioned office have inevitably had to include in their discussions poets whose careers lent necessary context and contrast to the laureates (however a given study defined that elite group). Moreover, it was necessary to invent categories for poets who lived before the creation of the official post, but who still seemed to merit a laureate label, or whose careers otherwise prefigured the duties and ambitions associated with the post. The desire to tell the story of laureateship fully, especially in attending to poets in this latter category, casts a great deal of emphasis on the notion of a poetic lineage. Scholars have

accordingly expended a great deal of effort to discern a heritage leading up to Dryden's appointment in 1668. In the process of reporting the history of laureateship, and consequently deciding who should occupy that heritage, scholars have offered or implied an impressive variety of criteria for the relative greatness and influence of pre-Laureate laureates. Taken together, these studies suggest a poetic lineage that resembles a scatter plot more than a tidy linear connect-the-dots.⁵

One would expect that the creation of the post would guarantee a neater account from that point onward. In official terms, it certainly does. Dryden's appointment ensured that the post itself was firmly identifiable from then on, supplying a title for an orderly succession of state-sanctioned and -pensioned poets. But it also introduced new difficulties into the matter of identifying a laureate poet. Dryden may have been the first official laureate, but the patent granting him the title identified him as a "successor" to William Davenant. Not only does this fact further muddle the notion of poetic lineage, but even the scholarly reporting of it has smudged the backward-looking assignation of laureateship to Davenant from Dryden into Davenant's own "succession" of Ben Jonson (Hopkins 16).⁶ Little wonder, then, that opinions should vary so greatly about the origins of the office, let alone about the status of the even earlier predecessors.

⁵ This impression arises from considering together surveys of laureateship that span roughly a century. Helgerson's study provides an evocative counterpoint to the three studies cited above. Helgerson focuses on laureate identity in the Renaissance, and his study stands somewhat apart from the others because of both his limited focus and his meticulous efforts to clarify the criteria by which he identifies laureates, both of the self- and the state-crowned variety. The three preceding studies, particularly those of Hamilton and Broadus, tend to imply a neat lineage of laureates before Dryden; as I suggest, however, each scholar construes that lineage rather differently.

⁶ Hopkins's account of the "successions" just described is telling in its slipperiness: "Davenant had succeeded to the Laureateship in a somewhat casual fashion after Ben Jonson died; and Ben Jonson had acquired it—rather vaguely—for services to James I" (16). Helgerson remarks, "Had Spenser and Jonson not broadened the way to such preferment, Davenant would not so soon have stumbled into it" (205).

This hazy ancestry includes Chaucer and Gower, according to Dryden's patent, and—almost absurdly—the very category of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, according to one laureate history.⁷

If nothing else, the retroactive naming illustrates the importance to the official laureate tradition of identifying a line of immediate predecessors as well as more distant classical ones. More importantly, its artificiality also clarifies the split between a bureaucratically classifiable title and a poet's own efforts to shape deliberately a career and an identity. How a poet situates himself, both in terms of lineage and among his contemporaries, is an essential question for understanding laureateship in the Renaissance, as Richard Helgerson has demonstrated. Nevertheless, self-presentation, if not self-crowning, remains a crucial point of investigation for poets writing after the establishment of the laureate office as well. Its creation legitimized the title, but from a scholarly standpoint, it does little to crystallize a definition of the ambitions of achievement and concerns about integrity that drive the "pre-laureates."⁸ By way of approaching these obsessions, however—for Drayton and Byron are both certainly obsessed—I will dwell a bit longer on the post itself as its reputation evolves, or rather

⁷ The lineage named in Dryden's patent is noted in Broadus 62, Hamilton xii, and elsewhere; Broadus makes the claim gathering even the Anglo-Saxon bards into the laureate nest. His assurance that "It is no straining of terms to say that the Anglo-Saxon *scop* is the first poet-laureate" (1) may spring from the fact that his terms are so loose as to allow an extension quite this imaginative.

⁸ The studies provide a chorus of creative terms: Hamilton offers "volunteer laureates" (xii) as a title for predecessors of Jonson; Broadus calls Drayton a "traditional poet laureate" in one chapter and, some pages later, demotes him along with Daniel to mere "other court-poets" (65); Hopkins endeavors to draw distinctions between "prelaureates" and "traditional laureates," and also feels the need to add quotes when he names "the first 'official' Laureate, John Dryden" (20). Even Helgerson provides one; his index contains an entry for Davenant as a "semi-official laureate."

devolves, after the Renaissance. With the degradation of the office in mind, we may gain a sharper sense of the ideals from which it supposedly fell.

Stars in the Sty

The institutionalization of the pensioned title of Poet Laureate raised the possibility that duties carried out in an official capacity might stand in opposition to or debase the spirit of “true” laureateship instead of upholding it.⁹ This latter case, the promotion of “unworthy laureates”—another creative formulation—became the norm in the eighteenth century (Woodman 47).¹⁰ In 1757 Thomas Gray refused the post, observing that “the office has always humbled the professor” (qtd. in Helgerson 7).

Hamilton summarizes the degradation of the office that had produced Gray’s disdain:

Pope once wrote an account of the office of Poet Laureate, and most appropriately it was a burlesque history, for its dignity at that time was a burlesque, its holder was a burlesque actor, and the comedies he wrote were burlesques of human life; yet was Cibber never so truly successful in burlesque as when composing what he meant for serious odes on New Year’s day, and the King’s birthday. (xvii)

⁹ Thomas Woodman notes: “After Dryden’s later enforced retirement from the court [after the Revolution], the split between the Renaissance ideal and the official post becomes total, and the latter turns into a party political appointment and then no more than a sinecure” (48). If the first Poet Laureate did not dishonor the office (and critics certainly differ on this point), his career suggests how closely even the newly-created post was linked to the disposition of the monarch and the state. Broadus offers the nicely equivocal title of “pliant panegyrist” (67) for Dryden; Dryden’s successor Thomas Shadwell preferred to apostrophize the evicted Laureate metonymically as “mercenary Bayes” (qtd. in Broadus 75).

¹⁰ The term is Woodman’s, from the page cited. By the eighteenth century, Helgerson suggests, “to be Poet Laureate had come to mean that one was quite decidedly not a laureate poet” (7), and calls Pope “the first anti-Laureate laureate” (11).

Unabashed toadying and verse that was, at least, often *accused* of dullness had come to be the hallmark of the office in the eighteenth century, and little had redeemed it in the first decades of the nineteenth. Indeed, if Leigh Hunt had had his way, Southey would not have had an office to take up. When the laureate Henry James Pye died in 1813—six years before the first two cantos of *Don Juan* were published—Hunt began a campaign to abolish the office entirely, arguing that it fostered the mutual debasement of both monarch and poet. Hunt emphasized the need to recover “sovereignty of character and independence of judgment” (Mahoney 233), qualities that had been bleached out of the title of Laureate by the exposure of too many Birthday Odes. Southey, for his part, accepted the post and went punctually about his duties, although he did resist the custom of the Birthday Odes (Hopkins 138). He wrote to Neville White in 1820:

My Laureateship has not been a sinecure: without reckoning the annual odes, which have regularly been supplied ... I have written, as Laureate, more upon public occasions (on none of which I should otherwise have composed a line) than has been written by any person who ever held the office before, with the single exception of Ben Jonson, if his Masques are taken into the account. (52-53; qtd. partially in Broadus 174)

One might be tempted to grant Southey a measure of leniency for his parenthetical remark, and the potential sense of obligation it could imply, if not for the contented reassurance of his correspondent that he *is* earning his pay. In the same letter, he proudly announces that he has finished a new work, *A Vision of Judgment*. The preface to this poem implicitly attacks Byron and Shelley via the epithet of the “Satanic School”

of poetry (Broadus 178), and earns Southey Byron's razor-sharp retaliation in both *Don Juan* (from the third canto onward) and a poem that directly parodies his own *Vision*.¹¹

Byron's lambasting of Southey and his office, then, hardly occurs in a vacuum. Beyond the invective in the Dedication to *Don Juan*,¹² Byron writes in the third canto that Lambro's court poet "lied with such a fervour of intention— / There was no doubt he earn'd his laureate pension" (III.80). That the laureate should be identifiable by sycophantic lies instead of truth, and condemned instead of praised by being the "representative of all the race" (Ded.1) suggests not only a view of the present incarnation of the office, but a sense that it could and should have been something inherently better than the "laureate's sty."

A similar, sometimes vaguely scandalized, sense is perceptible in scholarly accounts of the office as well. B. R. S. Fone, who provides a remarkably charitable preface to Colley Cibber's autobiographical apologia, writes: "Cibber's name...has come down as that of a poseur and clown. And indeed the reader who takes up his verses—and knows them to be the utterance of the laureate—can only be appalled" (x). Hamilton, too, seems slightly embarrassed to admit that "any account of the holders of the laurel wreath would have been incomplete had it omitted these literary feuds [in which non-laureates assaulted their laureate contemporaries], and the lampoons and

¹¹ Byron was certainly not the only one to denigrate Southey's poetry, and Southey himself along with it. Hamilton notes that Coleridge, in 1814, made a key for marginal abbreviations to Southey's poetry: "S.E. means Southey's English—i.e., no English at all. N. means nonsense. [...] L.M. Ludicrous metaphor. I.M. Incongruous metaphor. [...] Mercy on us, if I go on thus I shall make the book what I suppose it never was before, *red all thro'*" (qtd. in Hamilton 223).

¹² Byron conceded to suppress the Dedication at first due to his publisher's censorship concerns (Blann 42-44). He did *not* concede the point on Southey's behalf, but instead because of his reluctance to print the inflammatory attack on Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh. At that time Byron was abroad and "at too great a distance...to answer" any retaliation directly (Blann 42).

epigrams they occasioned” (xviii). Addressing even the “smartest and wittiest of these,” including *The Vision of Judgment*, Byron’s retaliatory poem, threatens to bog down a report of the laureateship with “the ludicrous side of the question” (xviii).

That “ludicrous side” is nevertheless marvelously and tellingly pernicious. The epigraph to Hamilton’s chapter on Southey, and allegedly Southey alone, is not an excerpt from the poet’s own work but instead the first two stanzas from *Don Juan’s* Dedication, “Bob Southey! You’re a poet—poet Laureate...” (215). We might consider this choice emblematic of a key feature of laureateship itself as well as a feature of how its history is told, and not simply because the office is clarified even to the point of relying upon an opposing and contradictory poetic impulse. After all, Helgerson remarks of the Renaissance laureates (and the comment is applicable more broadly), the question of laureate identity is just as much who to be as what to write (62), and reference to the careers of other poets provides necessary context for such self-creation. The counterpart may be, on one hand, summoned as a model, whether Virgil, Petrarch, Chaucer, or Alexander Pope. In any case the choice reflects a deliberate form of career- and identity-shaping; rare indeed is the opportunity to dictate to whom one is an heir, and this is a central dimension of the articulation of a laureate self.

On the other hand, defining a laureate by contrast is equally crucial, whatever characteristics that opposition might entail. For a critic, the opposition provides historical, ideological, or aesthetic context that may in fact be necessary to render the laureate’s career and ambitions intelligible. Hamilton’s discussion of Southey shows a certain ruefulness, a sense that the decorum of the office (again, note the lingering

impression that it “should” inherently be a lofty one) might be maintained more securely in the telling without recourse to hilarious satirical attacks, but that Southey’s unfortunate fate is to need Byron to contextualize his career, not the other way around. For a laureate himself, whether living in the age of self-crowning or of odes to the monarch, the “ethically normative and unchanging self” simply could not arise out of nothing, no matter how powerful the poet’s investment in the ideal of an authoritative and redemptively unchanging identity. The identification and then “rigorous exorcism and denial” of “reprehensible others” (Helgerson 10-11) is a necessary part of the self-presentation, and if it is at bottom an artificial and perpetually faltering endeavor, that fact does not lessen its conceptual force.

A laureate “presents a self whose authority derives from inner and outer alignment with the unmoving axis of normative value. His laureate function requires that he speak from the center. He does not, however, get to that still point easily. ...[T]he poet’s name must already mean something. ‘Who knowes not Colin Clout?’” (Helgerson 12). Understood as an abstracted paradox or as no more than an unavoidable reality, this truth has serious consequences for poetic identity. It places monumental importance on the constancy of self and purpose, but its enactment demands that the aspiring laureate embed himself in the contemporary modes of literary practice, and moreover that he harness an alarmingly considerable portion of his sense of achievement to his audience. Tripping up in that regard, whether the

audience be monarch or any book buyer, the laureate is left “to sing angry odes to himself” (25).¹³

What of a laureate who *has* mastered the modes of contemporary literary practice? Helgerson is surely correct when he suggests that “Only a poet whose career had become a public fact could successfully imitate, as both Spenser and Milton did, the Virgilian (or pseudo-Virgilian) *Ille ego*” (13). This is a crux of laureate identity: he is no role-player but a stable, morally centered *ego* underlying “all the poses of his fictive art” (42), and the *ego* and the works are inextricably linked. If such a poet does achieve accolades from a patron or the public, what does that mean for his commitment to a transcendent poetic and moral cause? Fame is the laureate’s ultimate double-edged blade, for its achievement is deeply ambivalent; has a popular laureate fulfilled his vocation or sacrificed his integrity? In terms of reaching the reading public, the laureate’s mission demands that he speak out to as wide an audience as possible. He and his transcendent cause are in a sorry state indeed if the leaves of best-selling poems eternize the lofty laureate but can just as easily wrap up groceries¹⁴ or line a suitcase.¹⁵

The pressures of this awareness manifest themselves with particular force in a laureate’s self-presentation. Byron’s rejection of Southey and his office does not

¹³ The pursuit of print as opposed to manuscript circulation for their works is among the characteristics by which Helgerson defines the Renaissance laureates (29). As for the vision of the underappreciated laureate singing angrily to himself, context suggests that Helgerson has Jonson in mind, but he may have just as readily—very readily—been thinking of Drayton.

¹⁴ This is the implied fate Jonson suggests in the epigram “To my bookseller,” supposedly preferring this to the purchasing of the poems by ignorant readers (Marotti 242).

¹⁵ “[T]he next time their servants tie on / Behind their carriages their new portmanteau, / Perhaps it will be lined with this my canto” (*Don Juan* II.16). Much later in *Don Juan*, Byron reaffirms this attitude, still in a cheerfully dismissive capitalistic spirit: “And though these lines should only line portmanteaus, / Trade will be all the better for these Cantos” (XIV.14).

preclude his patent awareness of the consequences of print culture and literary celebrity, and his sharing of those concerns does, in fact, help to position him unironically on the “heroic turnpike road” (I.6). Drayton, committed with unqualified zeal to the print medium, still finds himself railing against reluctant stationers who doubt the profitability of the work, especially alongside the better-selling items that Drayton does not hesitate to denounce as “bestly and abominable Trash” (4:v*). The reading audience is the critical unknown with which the laureate, sure of the constancy of his own calling, must ultimately contend, not because of an overriding demand for popularity but because the laureate ethos forbids the resignation of sulkily singing of odes to oneself. To engage with the vast and unpredictable body of readers is, of course, the great lure and liability for any poet who dares print, but for a print poet with laureate aspirations, the endeavor has high stakes indeed.

II. *The “Vates Irritabilis” and the Distractible Muse*¹⁶

“Reader, to him that may (perhaps) say my subject is idle and worthlesse, I might this answere (if hee will see in reading, or read with understanding) that the greatest Masters in this Art (though my selfe, not for any affectation of singularitie) have written upon as slight matter.”¹⁷

With no royal patent, pension, or preferment to bolster Drayton’s claim to laureateship (which is not to say that he did not try) how do we know that we can rightly call him a laureate? For proof, I would not turn first to his pastorals for Spenserian echoes, nor to his immense chorographical poem *Poly-Olbion*, but to the quote in the epigraph of this section, noting in particular how splendidly grouchy he sounds. This proposal is not as facetious as it might seem; the passage exemplifies several laureate interests and concerns which provide necessary context for an analysis of Drayton’s self-presentation in *Idea*. When he compiled his 1619 folio, Drayton deliberately chose to include the sonnet sequence within this authoritative context (after a quarter century of tweaking and long after the sonnet-writing clamor of the 1590s had

¹⁶ “Vates irritabilis” is a Byronic twist on a line from Horace (*Epistles*, II.ii.102; cited in the textual notes to the *Major Works*, p. 1049), appearing in *Don Juan*, III.81. In context, Byron uses this title in reference to Lambro’s court poet, the figure who “lied with such a fervour of intention— / There was no doubt he earn’d his laureate pension” (III.80); the character described is a composite of both Byron and Southey (1049). As I can think of few epithets more fitting for Drayton than “irritable poet,” this phrase seems too good to pass up.

¹⁷ From the preface to *The Owle* (included in the 1619 folio); 2:479.

quieted). The sequence is an integral part of his laureate self-fashioning, not merely because he includes it in the folio but because he *embeds* it there, linking it with other genres and styles of poetry in the collection as well as a considerable apparatus of annotations, contextualizing comments, and addresses to his audience. This composite works to constitute his authority, in the sense of both poetic self and a statement of the right to be heard. As my epigraph—not to mention common sense—suggests, however, simply being heard is hardly a guarantee of being understood. For a poet convinced that sonnet convention provided a necessary aspect of his laureate identity, retaining the interest of his readers as well as guiding their understanding was a serious matter.

Print and a Great Audience

Drayton's reputation has endured some rough handling. His treatment in accounts of laureateship, in fact, borders on the painfully comical. Hamilton affords him a sentence, remarking that "[Samuel] Daniel was the last of the Volunteer Laureates, for although Michael Drayton has been sometimes called by that title, he does not appear to have had any just claim to it" (41). Broadus gives him a bit more attention, grouping him into one brief chapter with Spenser and Daniel ("as Traditional Poets Laureate" [33]), and mentions, ruinously, that Southey had "counted not only these two but *even Drayton* among his official predecessors" (33, emphasis mine). He notes that Drayton's aspirations as a court poet do provide some cause to consider him

as a laureate, but the criteria Broadus applies turn out to be his sense of obsequious flattery in Drayton's panegyrics to royals and aristocrats (37)—an unfortunately retroactive application of the later corrosion of the official title. Hopkins, bent on pinning down only those poets with "a definite appointment to a definite post" (16), gives a few pages to Jonson and Davenant and does not mention Drayton at all.

More recently, critics have given Drayton's works and ambitions more evenhanded consideration. Helgerson's occasional discussion of Drayton alongside Spenser and with respect to a "self-crowning" laureate mindset in general has doubtlessly aided the process. A refocusing of attention on Drayton's self-presentation and ambition is especially valuable, moreover, because it forestalls further consideration of the poet as a failure due to his notoriously hard luck gaining and keeping the support of patrons.¹⁸ Indeed, Andrew Hadfield's recent study aims specifically to reframe Drayton's career as a success "in the terms he set himself, establishing himself as a major poet in print, widely read and having influence on the development of other writers" (119). This study acknowledges Drayton's laureate aims, but describes him principally as a "professional writer" (121), a category that Helgerson proposes in opposition to the laureates, and a distinction I find conceptually useful and worth maintaining, though it is slightly artificial (at least as a category entirely exclusive

¹⁸ See Hadfield 119 and Brink 66. "As well as his poetic talent," Hadfield remarks, "Drayton also had a nearly infallible ability to time his bids for patronage poorly," dedicating the 1597 edition of *Englands Heroicall Epistles* to a group of aristocrats related to Viscount Beauchamp, "the Suffolk claimant of the English crown and a serious rival to James. He compounded this error by dedicating the work to two prominent Catholic noblemen, William Parker, Baron Monteagle and Henry, Lord Howard, son of the executed Tudor poet, both of whom were already in contact with James" (123).

of laureateship). Nevertheless, Hadfield's formulation highlights the centrality of print in Drayton's career, the importance of which cannot be overstated.

Returning to the epigraph: to read Drayton's preoccupations in miniature via this passage, we might note first that he conveys his irritation as well as his verse (and sometimes *in* his verse) to his audience via print. Unflinchingly committed to this medium, and scornful of the elitism of coterie poetry that circulated in manuscript, Drayton expressed frustration that his poetry was not properly appraised at a time when "Verses are wholly deduc'd to Chambers, and nothing esteem'd in this lunatique Age, but what is kept in Cabinets, and must only passe by Transcription" (*Works*, 4:v*).¹⁹ Indeed, presenting oneself to the public as a poet was not a wholly uncontroversial gambit:

If Elizabethans understood poetry to be merely a fugitive and licentious toy—and, however loudly poetry was sometimes praised, such a view was widespread—then the laureate might have no way both to distinguish himself and to retain his title to poetry. Bend too close to contemporary practice and he would topple from his laureate eminence to "rolle with [the] rest"; but hold to that eminence with too little concession and he would, as Drayton discovered, lose his readers, and perhaps even the name of poet. (Helgerson 23)

But for a poet adamantly opposed to cloistered verse, few alternatives were available.

"[G]ood poetry enticed men to 'imbrace a civill life,'" (Brink 94), Drayton believed, and the laureate duty to speak out from a fundamentally public office (Helgerson 47)

¹⁹ Arthur Marotti notes how the "stigma of print" made both aristocrats and "lower-class individuals with social aspirations...reluctant to print their poetry because they felt threatened by the commercializing and democratizing features of the print medium" (210). The converse is also true; manuscript culture persisted alongside print culture well into the seventeenth century, partially because it "allowed those who participated in it to feel that they were part of a social as well as an intellectual elite" (Marotti 34). In a 1627 elegy/epistle of literary criticism, Drayton offers a catalogue and evaluation of English and Scottish poets from Chaucer to William Browne; Jean Brink remarks that Drayton's omission of John Donne, perhaps the quintessential coterie poet, is conspicuous. She continues: "Coterie poetry...lacked the heroic aspiration that Drayton required of poetry" (129-30).

obliged him continually to re-engage with as wide a readership as possible. That he also found it necessary continually to berate his readers for willful ignorance and intellectual lethargy²⁰ illustrates the relative importance in his mind of duty and tact.

We might also remark that this particular address is aimed toward readers, and not a patron. Certainly Drayton produced a substantial body of dedicatory verse to noble patrons and would-be patrons; the commendatory poetry with which he prefaces his work falls fairly unexceptionally in line with contemporary convention. But his addresses to readers overshadow the dedicatory poems in number and especially in vehemence. Hadfield remarks: “As early as 1594 Drayton made it clear to his audience that he attached far more importance to his readership than to his potential patrons” (145). A look at the relationship between Drayton and Lucy Harington Russell, Countess of Bedford, will serve nicely to encapsulate this point.

Drayton first appealed for the patronage of the Countess of Bedford in 1594, soon after *Ideas Mirrour*, the first incarnation of his sonnet sequence, had been published (Brink 8). Drayton continued to make polite bids for attention and support from Lucy through the remainder of the 1590s, receiving a measure of support but evidently not cementing a particularly intimate relationship (10). The Countess became a powerful figure in the Jacobean court, “an influential power broker in the competition for preferment,” and the object of poetic compliments from Samuel Daniel, Ben Jonson, and John Donne (18). Unfortunately for Drayton, in the first few years of James’s reign Lucy was far more forthcoming with literary patronage for other poets, particularly Daniel

²⁰ See the preface to the second part of *Poly-Olbion*, 4:391.

and Jonson,²¹ and by 1603, some serious falling-out had occurred between them (Taylor 215). Not a man to take patronage or anything else very lightly, in 1606 Drayton revised and reprinted *Idea the Shepherds Garland*, a series of pastorals first published more than a decade earlier, with a new and remarkably harsh attack²² on Lucy as “Selena, a faithless patroness who has deserted the faithful Rowland” (Brink 18), one of the pastoral pseudonyms Drayton adopts.

This bitter response to withdrawn support has undoubtedly contributed to Drayton’s dour (or, more kindly, uncompromising) reputation. Alongside this ought to be considered another key result of Drayton’s break with Lucy, however, or rather the absence of a result. Dick Taylor, Jr. calls attention to the odd fact that, although cool feelings may have existed between poet and patroness even a few years before the 1606 invective against “Selena,” multiple dedicatory verses to both Lucy and her mother, Lady Anne Harington, were retained in the re-printings of the *Poems* (1608, 1610, and 1613) until 1619 (Taylor 214-17). This is a significant non-action for a poet who placed such careful emphasis on presenting himself authoritatively through print. Taylor discusses early seventeenth-century printing practice and argues that Drayton, regardless of his sentiment for Lucy, had to submit to the practical exigencies of the

²¹ Hadfield intriguingly suggests that the relationship between Drayton and Jonson was more a matter of the poets’ mutual maintenance of public image than has been generally supposed. He argues that Jonson’s dedicatory poem of praise to Drayton’s *The Battaile of Agincourt* “establishes the importance of a public friendship between the two poets. The fact that Jonson was critical of Drayton in private later, remarking to William Drummond of Hawthornden that ‘Drayton feared him, and he esteemed him not,’ perhaps only serves to emphasize that both writers saw the importance of the medium of print as a means of poetic representation” (130).

²² He curses her with the utmost anti-Petrarchan violence to grow old and ugly soon, to live unhappily and to die in oblivion (Brink 19). Although he removes the passages that attack Lucy when he includes the poem in his folio, Brink observes that “he also eliminated all dedications and complimentary poems addressed to Lucy during the 1590s” (19).

medium and retain the verses until he compiled the folio, which was his “first unhindered opportunity” (228) to restructure the poetry and its intercalated dedications and addresses.

I do not mean to make an argument about Drayton’s attitude based purely on an action he did not take, withholding the poems with “expired” dedications. His decision to continue re-issuing them nevertheless bolsters Hadfield’s suggestion that, while Drayton did maintain an interest in having the great (that is, the noble) as an audience to his work, the laureate aspirant placed greater stock in a great—wide—readership. If outdated and nonfunctional prefatory epistles and complimentary sonnets were the cost of keeping his work and his poetic identity in the public eye, Drayton was prepared to accept that cost.

*The Dignitie of the Thing was the Motive of the Doing*²³

The 1619 folio, *Poems: By Michael Drayton Esquire*, constitutes one of Drayton’s most unmistakable gestures toward laureate status. After decades of not just printing a wide variety of poetry but obsessively adjusting and reprinting it, Drayton’s act of assembling together a volume of collected works is a decisively authoritative statement.²⁴ Granted, he likely meant each of the successive releases of *The Barons*

²³ From the introduction “To the Reader of the *Barons Warres*,” the first item in the folio; 2:3.

²⁴ A key consequence of favoring print over manuscript transmission is the loss in print of the relative immediacy of personal context between poet and audience. How an author works to present himself in print culture is doubly significant, then, since it is both artificial and part of the art.

Warres, Englands Heroicall Epistles, Idea and the other poetry he includes in 1619 to be authoritative at the time,²⁵ a point which admittedly deflates the notion of monumental authority²⁶ a trifle. Nevertheless, the volume represents a definitive arrangement of works, and more specifically, an arrangement not of segregated particles but interconnected components comprising a whole. It sounds suspiciously like a sonnet sequence.

Regrettably, the prospect of discerning such an organizing principle in the 1619 *Poems* seems too good to be true. A consideration of the generic logic and advantages of sonnets and sonnet sequences does, however, offer some conceptual models that I believe are relevant to Drayton's folio. Michael R. G. Spiller describes the sonnet sequence as a formal structure remarkable for its balancing of "the immediate experience of each sonnet with the cumulative awareness of the whole series" (14). Such an entity is an aggregate in which the parts that comprise it maintain meaningfulness separately (20), while each individual sonnet also acts as "a dialectic instrument" (12). Spiller seems to me to be proposing a molecular theory of the sonnet sequence: the discrete parts are themselves complex, and divisible if necessary, but into elements that may not (and probably will not) reflect the quality of the bonded

²⁵ This statement encompasses prefatory and dedicatory material as well as the poetry. Brink notes, for example, that Drayton's re-releases of *Englands Heroicall Epistles* in 1598 and 1599 involved strategic omissions of patronage-seeking dedications, as well as "new epistles designed to make the poem less susceptible to political interpretation," as well as adding—predictably enough—"two new dedications that comment upon patronage in an aggrieved tone" (11).

²⁶ Hadfield provides a fascinating note on the portrait of Drayton at the beginning of the folio: Drayton is "the first English poet to preface his poetry with a visual representation of himself wearing the laurel crown. Many think that Jonson inaugurated this tradition, but Robert Vaughan's engraving of Jonson as poet laureate dates from the 1640 edition of his poems [first published in 1616] and may actually owe something to Drayton's portrait" (122). With respect to Jonson, Jennifer Brady points out the risk of the folio of works "gain[ing] a canonical life independent of its author and maker. The *Workes* supplanted Jonson as the authority that coerced" (qtd. in Marotti 243-44). This seems to be one of the risks most intimately and inevitably arising from laureate ambition.

molecule. Moreover, the sonnet-molecule is a fundamentally stable and structured particle, but—as Spiller’s term “dialectic instrument” evocatively implies—it is not a *static* one, instead working via a perpetual balancing and interplay of energies. The principle that unifies, or at least thematically relates, the component sonnets will vary from sequence to sequence; this term Spiller defines as the intentional linking-together of poems “by something other than single authorship” (16). But this is the indispensable principle governing a laureate’s volume of collected works. His identity is the charge acting on both parts and whole.

What, then, is the nature of the “charge” in the 1619 *Poems*? Drayton streamlines much of the prefatory material that had accompanied the individual works in their previous imprinting, eliminating many dedicatory addresses and juggling the placement of others. But the poetry of his folio is punctuated and bracketed throughout by introductions, lectures, and (occasionally defensive) explanations. Indeed, before every section except for *Idea*, Drayton furnishes an analysis of the genre, history, and peculiar characteristics of the poem that follows (Brink 99). The “charge,” I suggest, is a pedagogical impulse legitimized by Drayton’s articulation of laureate authority. He makes uncompromising demands on his readers to understand his verse—the laureate’s designs and intentions matter—but equally assumes the responsibility of equipping them for the task; and woe betide the readers who do not hold up their end

of this forcibly mutual bargain.²⁷ He shapes the context for his works; we are bound to consider it duly.

Idea in Context

As I suggest above, *Idea* deserves consideration with respect to its place in Drayton's authoritative volume. This is not to say that the sequence is fated to being misunderstood if read in isolation, but rather to emphasize how the structure he provides illuminates several dimensions of his poetic self-presentation. To begin, then, we might first take note that *Idea* is preceded by *Englands Heroicall Epistles*. But this ordering is not new to the 1619 collection. The *Epistles* and *Idea* were first published together in 1599 and remained so up through publication in the folio (*Works* 5:100), hinged together by a sonnet, "A Catalogue of the Heroicall Loves."

The World's faire Rose, and HENRIES frosty fire,
JOHN'S tyranny, and chaste MATILDA'S wrong,
Th'inraged Queene, and furious MORTIMER,
The Scourge of *France*, and his chaste Love I sung,
[...]
Their sev'rall Loves since I before have showne,
Now give me leave, at last, to sing mine owne. (2:308)

The *Epistles* are a fictionalized series of letters in verse between historical figures. The title page promises, and Drayton delivers, the epistles "with Some short Annotations of

²⁷ In the preface to the first part of *Poly-Olbion* (1612): "[W]hosoever thou be, possessest with such stupidity & dulnesse, that, rather then thou wilt take paines to search into antient and noble things, choosdest to remaine in the thicke fogges and mists of ignorance, as neere the common Lay-stall of a Citie [...] If as, I say, thou hadst rather, (because it asks thy labour) remaine, where thou wert, then straine thy selfe to walke forth with the Muses; the fault proceeds from thy idlenesse, not from any want in my industrie" (4:v*).

the Chronicle Historie to the same” (2:129), providing historical background and some literary analysis. Drayton’s preface emphasizes that the annotations are an integral part of the work, assuring his readers: “I have inter-woven Matters Historicall, which unexplained, might defraud the Mind of much Content” (2:130). Guarding against this waste of learned allusion, the annotations punctuate each epistle until the sonnet quoted above marks the transition to the sonnet sequence.

This sonnet is worth remark chiefly for its explicit modulation of Drayton’s voice between two quite disparate genres. The miniature catalogue replicates the summary style of the epistles’ annotations, except that here Drayton’s explanatory voice shifts into the first-person confessional mode of the sonnets. The transition in the concluding couplet makes clear that the “I” who has been providing historical footnotes is the same “I” that will sing his own “loves.” In this transitional poem, a sonneteer persona (recalling again Helgerson’s emphasis on the undercurrent of truth and fixed identity beneath the attitudes a laureate strikes in his self-presentation) is no more or less fictional than the “I” that jointly underlies the epistles and their annotations. Most emphatically, this poem situates *Idea* as a sequence in the voice of “Michael Drayton Esquire”—his name appears on each subtitle page in the volume—and not that of a doppelganger like Sidney’s Astrophil. To be sure, Drayton the sonnet speaker and Astrophil are both fictionalized impersonations, but Drayton means to maintain a recognizable and authoritative voice through as many works as the folio offers, and to present that voice specifically as himself-as-poet, not himself-as-character. The tag

“mine owne” will become an important marker for structuring the sequence later on as well.

Idea in 1619 opens with one sonnet to the reader; earlier publications of the sequence had had a variety of shuffled dedications to patrons and addresses to readers, but the poet pares down the introduction to this single sonnet, to complete the transition into the sequence.

Into these Loves, who but for Passion lookes,
At this first sight, here let him lay them by,
And seeke else-where, in turning other Bookes,
Which better may his labour satisfie.
No farre-fetch'd Sigh shall ever wound my Brest,
Love from mine Eye a Teare shall never wring,
Nor in Ah-mees my whyning sonnets drest,
(A Libertine) fantastickly I sing:
My Verse is the true image of my Mind,
Ever in motion, still desiring change;
And as thus to Varietie inclin'd,
So in all Humors sportively I range:
My Muse is rightly of the English straine,
That cannot long one Fashion intertaine. (2:310)²⁸

The “heroicall loves” have been fully transposed into the poet’s own loves. In the 1594 *Ideas Mirrour*, each sonnet is numbered but also labeled “Amour. 1,” “Amour. 2,” and so on; in 1605 each is labeled as “Sonnet” and a cardinal number. In the folio, each of the subsequent sonnets is designated simply by a number. This sonnet appears first in 1599, and then it is incorporated as part of the sequence; it is only made into a prefatory address for the folio (5:302).²⁹ “Loves,” then, becomes a collective label for the whole

²⁸ Drayton revises the concluding couplet. In its first version, the sonnet concludes, “My active Muse is of the worlds right straine / That cannot long one Fashion intertaine” (5:142).

²⁹ Tillotson provides an extremely helpful table of all Drayton’s sonnets which notes each one’s place in sequence and edition.

more than a description forcibly delimiting each component part. Drayton may offer up plenty conventional expressions of helpless devotion—there are many implicit “Ah mees,” in spite of his disclaimer—but “loves” as a framing device in the folio also encompasses a number of sonnets in which the speaker seems rather more inclined to come back to his senses than to continue having his wits troubled by affection (e.g. *Idea* 9). *Idea*’s verse is “the true image of my mind” not because it consists of unrelieved praises, but specifically because it is “inclin’d,” not “reluctantly subject” to variety. Internal inconsistency is, in fact, what allows the sequence taken as a whole to strive toward a true representation of experience. “True image” in this sonnet does not seem to labor under any suspiciously oxymoronic sense, where “image” might work to undercut “true.” Rather, the truth is the ideal alignment and expression of mind and verse together.

Walter Davis, noting the “varietie” of *Idea*’s mixed conventionality and unconventionality, proposes that the sequence works through a comic plot progression. He argues for but does not suggest the potential intent behind Drayton’s presentation of a speaker “striving for variety rather than depth of expressiveness” (205), nor for the claim that the sequence ends still mired in “tired Petrarchan conceit” specifically as a way of mockingly emblemizing its own imitative basis (215). Davis takes *Idea* as an isolated unit, thus losing the embedded interrelation with *Englands Heroicall Epistles*, as I note above. The speaker of *Idea* becomes simply one more masquerade-prone sonnet speaker, then, even if Davis does sense enough earnestness to argue that “the lover...sees himself comically and praises [his mistress] seriously” (209). Considering

the representation of the speaker as Drayton himself does not invalidate Davis's proposal of comic logic in the sequence, but grants it a richer complexity; we can consider the experimentation with conceit and convention not as variations intrinsic to the sequence but rather *this* poet's *deliberate* testing of traditional modes, exploring what purposes they can serve. That is, the spotlight falls squarely on Drayton's use of the form (with particular emphasis on Drayton) instead of this or that instance of a recycled motif. The organizing principle of the sequence becomes not "Drayton as Petrarchan lover" but "Drayton as sonnet speaker."

This point is borne out by a second sonnet³⁰ Drayton had used in previous releases of *Idea* but did not include in the folio, because, I suspect, the one above was able to communicate all the self-presentational information he required of it without being confined to a dedicatory context. The sestet of this sonnet is relevant here.

Referring to his lines of verse, Drayton writes:

Yet these mine owne, I wrong not other men,
Nor trafique further then thys happy Clyme,
Nor filch from *Portes* nor from *Petrarchs* pen,
A fault too common in thys latter time.
Divine Syr *Phillip*, I avouch thy writ,
I am no Pickpurse of anothers wit.

Though in this sonnet, "mine owne" emphasizes (alleged) originality rather than ownership and poetic identifiability, the repetition of the phrase here, as in the above-mentioned sonnet, is notable. In addition, the couplet is among Drayton's most delicious bursts of wit, since the final line is, in fact, plagiarized directly from *Astrophil*

³⁰ "Vouchsafe to grace these rude unpolish'd rymes," addressed to Anthony Cooke, Esquire. In *Works* 1:96.

and Stella 74 (5:15). Lovely as this twist might be, it works to situate the laureate sonneteer more in terms of his synchronic context than to set him loftily apart from it; Sidney provides a useful recent model to cite in the project of undertaking a sonnet sequence, but not as much for the project of authoritative laureate autonomy. The conspicuous borrowing does, nevertheless, work alongside Drayton's annotations and appropriation of well-used sonnet conventions as part of his endeavor to encourage in his readers a fuller, more informed, and more critical engagement with his text. Dropping an obvious instance of "filching" into the sonnet encourages weighing the borrower alongside the originator, and moreover weighing the implications of importing verse. Broadly, Drayton invites the critical (in the sense of analytical) evaluation of *why* he has borrowed, since he presents so clearly *what* he has borrowed. By doing so he is able to maintain the spotlight on his own borrowing of the line rather than Sidney's origination of it (though note in the following chapter a similar instance of borrowing in *Don Juan*).

Helgerson does not consider *Idea* part of Drayton's articulation of laureate status; or rather, the sonnets are an amateur³¹ undertaking that is later subsumed beneath other more distinctively laureate genres:

"Wild, madding, jocund, and irregular," the "wanton verse" of Drayton's *Idea*³² belongs, with the amateur juvenilia of other laureates, in the Donne

³¹ For Helgerson's discussion of laureates and amateurs, and how these categories are defined and opposed, see pp. 25-35.

³² This line comes from a prefatory sonnet ("Many there be excelling in this kind") that Drayton includes with *Idea* from 1599 until the folio edition. The sestet of this sonnet (continued on the following page):

My wanton verse nere keepes one certaine stay,
But now, at hand; then, seekes invention far,
And with each little motion runnes astray,
Wilde, madding, jocund, & irregular;

column [characterized as amateur, private, excessive, spontaneous, and immediate]. ...[F]or the dutifully laureate *Barons' Wars*, Drayton sought rather Jonsonian "majesty, perfection, and solidity" To be sure, style follows genre, but both follow career type. Only a poet of a certain kind writes a poem like the *Barons' Wars*. (33-34)

Regarding the classification of *Idea*, I disagree. The *Barons Warres* is published for the first time in 1603 (5:69); it may be a "dutifully laureate" work, but it does not cancel out less decorous or elevated genres. Drayton includes both of these works in the folio presumably because he thought both had something important to contribute to his laureate profile. To put it another way: a laureate who has written both pastoral and epic does not become *only* an epic poet by the force of generic prestige; the genres that have preceded and helped shape the possibility for an epic identity do not simply disappear. The same applies, I think, to Drayton's sonnets and the historical verse of the *Barons Warres*. Later in the folio, in the preface to his revised *Pastorals. Contayning Eglogues*, Drayton writes that "Master EDMUND SPENSER had done enough for the immortalie of his Name, had he only given us his *Shepheards Kalendar*, a Master-piece if any" (2:518). Colin Clout remains, even within *The Faerie Queene* and in its wake; Drayton leaves no doubt in this respect about whether or not he sets himself up in Spenser's poetic lineage.

Ensuring both immortality of name and the attention of the immediate reading audience, however, makes enormous demands of a poem. A laureate is apt to chafe if the gestures required by the circumstances of his literary generation (sonnet

Like me that lust, my honest mery rimes,
Nor care for Criticke, nor regard the times. (1:485)

conventions, for example) make his efforts to speak out to the public look like frivolity. His self-presentation involves *not* taking refuge behind the disclaimer that his poetry is idle play, while speaking through paradigms typically defended by that very point. The effect in the sonnets is curious. *Idea* 31 (“To the Criticke”) admits a practical problem:

Since Sonnets thus in Bundles are imprest,
And ev’ry Drudge doth dull our satiate Eare;
Think’st thou my Love shall in those Ragges be drest,
That ev’ry Dowdy, ev’ry Trull doth weare?
Up, to my Pitch, no common Judgement flies,
I scorne all Earthly Dung-bred Scarabies.

Certainly it is a formidable undertaking to keep readers’ attention with overworked convention in a common genre dominated by hacks. That the alternative presented here swings so excessively from the commonplace to the bizarre—I have yet to find the word “dung-bred” in any other Renaissance sonnet—suggests Drayton is not interested purely in maintaining the decorum of the form, but working to maintain its viability as a means of communication. The very act of twisting a convention, that is, comprises part of his labor to ensure that readers’ minds are not “defrauded” of content. The concept expressed in this passage, lofty poetic ability and originality, is immensely important to Drayton, but his articulation of it runs the risk of simply droning on to the general “satiating Eare.” A strange and extreme twist such as the diction of this sonnet ensures that a commonplace assertion will not be received as a commonplace; its oddness renders the concept just opaque enough so that a cloyed reader will have to

labor a bit to discern the poet's claim. By these means, Drayton is able at once to rehabilitate the usefulness of a poetic form and to keep his readers' attention primed.

"Primed" does not, however, mean "in a state of unrelieved focus." As I observed above, the verse that is the "true image of my mind" in the opening sonnet consists of an ever-shifting image, but its perpetual change defines its truth *and* its interest. *Idea 57* supplies a new formulation for this true image:

Ev'n as a Man that in some Trance hath seene
More than his wond'ring utt'rance can unfold,
That rapt in Spirit, in better Worlds hath beene,
So must your prayse distractedly be told [...]

Distraction³³ becomes the marker of earnestness and sincerity, and paradoxically, a potent type of focus, readily inviting and teaching a reader to shift between registers of perception, moving from the immediate object of attention to the poet whose artifice mediates the reader's experience with the sonnet, the sequence, the folio. "Divine IDEA" (*Idea 39*) may be the occasion for distraction, but the sequence's organizing principle remains Drayton himself. The final sonnet in *Idea*, "Truce, gentle Love, a Parly now I crave," ends with a dare: "I send defiance [to Love], since if overthrowne, / Thou vanquishing, the Conquest is mine owne." The concluding "mine owne" looks backward, bracketing *Idea* with the preceding *Epistles*, and looks forward to the next item in the volume, led off, as each work is, with the title page naming "Michael Drayton, Esquire."

³³ In a discussion of *Poly-Olbion*, Paula Johnson characterizes Drayton's Muse as "pleased but distractible," alternately directing and/or merging with the poet, moving within the landscape described, and serving as audience to the poem (48). She does not refer to the above-cited sonnet.

III. *Epic Renegade*

“[...Y]ou are too earnest and eager about a work never intended to be serious;—do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle?—a playful satire with as little poetry as could be helped—was what I meant...”³⁴

“You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny—I *have* no plan—I *had* no plan—but I had or have materials—”³⁵

Legion are the labels critics have marshaled in an effort to characterize by a single description the sprawling variety of *Don Juan*, particularly the changeable tone of Byron's narrator, that chattiest of figures with “epical pretensions to the laurel” (I.209). It is telling that most of these labels are modifications or qualifications using “epic” as a base: the poem has been picked apart under the name of “anti-epic” (Lauber), a “mock-heroic narrative on the Cervantean model” (Salomon 69), and as an “epic of indeterminacy,” in which Byron “revo[kes] rather than revis[es]...epic tradition” (Lord 147). This cluster of titles suggests a tendency to read *Don Juan* as a poem that was *supposed* to be decorous, or at least orderly, by the force of generic precedent. While this attitude has produced illuminating explorations of genre and convention, nevertheless

³⁴ Lord Byron, letter to John Murray, August 1819 (in *Letters and Journals*, ed. Marchand, 6:208).

³⁵ *Letters and Journals*, 6:207

it measures the inconsistencies of *Don Juan* against an ideal that inevitably does injustice to the logic of Byron's poem. What good from a "revoked" epic?

At its extreme, this critical attitude finds helpless nihilism in the text's shifts of tone and ideology. Byron's engagement with laureate tradition, however, is far more complex than a simple puncturing of lofty epic convention, or the leveling of satiric darts at Southey or Wordsworth; and the variations of tone are anything but helpless. The alternately acerbic and hilarious deflations of laureate convention in *Don Juan* illustrate a decisive means to refocus an audience's attention. When a steady gush of greatness and sublimity cloys, humor and outrageousness invite a re-engagement with the topic at hand; they prevent outworn convention from inhibiting critical reading.

This tactic makes a space for the legitimacy of humor in the process of critical reading. A reader motivated alternatively to giggle and gape³⁶ is engaged with the text in a way that neither consistent sublimity nor satire can guarantee. Byron's humor does not need apology, then, but a fuller explanation; I would like to suggest that the humor and outrageousness in *Don Juan* are specifically a function of Byron's response to the pose of laureateship. The abrupt shifts constantly provoke and facilitate a reader's transitions between sympathy and detachment (if not antipathy), and these are equally useful because they equally ensure that we are not indifferent to the poem or its poet.

³⁶ An exceptional instance which I will not have time to address here is Juan's farewell to Spain and Julia as he sets sail, which horrifyingly and wonderfully intersperses Juan's high-flown declarations of longing and faithfulness with seasick gagging (II.18-21). I will discuss below a slightly more extended instance, the anaphoric "'Tis sweet..." section in I.122-27 (e.g. "Sweet to the father is his first-born's birth / Sweet is revenge—especially to women" [I.124]).

Before I approach the text of *Don Juan* itself, I would like to situate my argument in terms of two particular trends in the criticism of the poem, both related to the implicit sense of failure to which I refer above. The first trend is the tendency among critics to be somewhat apologetic about *Don Juan's* outrageousness, particularly when discussing abrupt shifts in tone created by the proximity of seemingly sincere, or at least sober, remarks to flippancy or salaciousness. Until the early 1990s, Byron's humor seemed to be cause for faint embarrassment,³⁷ a point to observe in discussion mainly with respect to how it impeded the elements of seriousness, or the continuity of the narrative. The critic who opted for the name of "anti-epic" observes that the "comic rhymes and epigrams...instantly attract attention to themselves *at the expense of* the continuing action or prevailing mood" (Lauber 616), recouping the poem shortly after by remarking that it "has a kind of seriousness, *for all its flippancy and inconsistency*" (619, emphases mine). Another speaks of the "facetiousness...which...makes it impossible to take very seriously the reproof" that Haidee had forgotten the stygian perils of her intimacy with Juan (Wikborg 273). Discussing the close of Canto II, this second critic also observes: "There is also...a note of seriousness in the stanzas, suggesting, in its turn, that here too there lies a truth *deserving of recognition*" (276, emphasis mine). The assumption that we may only justifiably seek the poem's insight in moments of solemnity is the main pitfall of these arguments, if for no other reason than that it requires us to disregard or treat casually far too much of the poem. Emerging from this

³⁷ A few critics have also taken a decidedly aggressive stance toward *Don Juan's* engagement with epic tradition, finding the effect of the poem itself destructive to the conventions upon which it draws. Critics that argue along these lines usually consider the perceived generic destructiveness damning (see Lauber, p. 618 and especially Lord, p. 147), although Roger B. Salomon argues that it paves the way for a "new epic" (75).

atmosphere of critical modesty, Michael O'Neill speaks productively about Byron's "brilliant self-display," noting that it "does not diminish interest in his poem's invented realities" (166) even if it interrupts the narrative. O'Neill's willingness to argue that "the fun and ingenuity...impress" (166) lays a foundation upon which I hope to build.

The second trend I wish to emphasize is the impulse to consider the prismatic variety of tone and ideology in *Don Juan* as ultimately self-negating. The seeds of this view are perceptible in Eleanor Wikborg's argument that the alternation of tone in the poem undercuts the seemingly earnest commentary (273) to the point of suggesting the indifferent relativism of all perspectives and attitudes. At the most counterproductive extreme of this inclination toward reading the poem in nihilistic terms is Charles LaChance's assertion that "Byronic mobility takes an incompatible series of joyrides with platonic Christianity, materialism, sentimentality, heroics and liberalism" (283), eventually crash-landing them all into "antagonistic ambiguities" (297). Fortunately, more recent criticism has extricated itself from this kind of conversation-stopping wreckage, and reexamined both Byron and *Don Juan*. By bringing Byron's engagement with laureateship to the fore, I hope to show that the variability of the poem's topics and tone—like Drayton's verse, "ever in motion"—comprise part of a deliberate effort to channel and benefit from the energy of unpredictability.

The Usual Method, But Not Mine

Byron, writing to his publisher John Murray after the first two cantos had been published together in 1819, was already prepared to respond to a friend of Murray who had objected to the “quick succession of fun and gravity” (6:207)³⁸ in the poem. The “Soul of such writing,” Byron argues, is in the “*liberty* of that *license*...*not* that one should abuse it—it is like trial by Jury and Peerage—and the Habeas Corpus—a very fine thing—but chiefly in the *reversion*—because no one wishes to be tried for the mere pleasure of proving his possession of the privilege” (6:208). The drastic shifts in tone are no exercise for their own sake, then, nor should they be. Twisting and flouting a convention, whether social or literary, is instructive; as the narrator says while musing on Juan’s Spanish education, “Spain may prove an exception to the rule, / But then exceptions always prove its worth” (II.2). Conventions do not exist solely to be proven—that is, tested—but a vigorous test does clarify their usefulness, or its lack.

Byron could hardly have chosen a more fertile proving ground than epic, or the attendant opportunity to try on the pose of a pretentious laureate (and in this respect his sense of poetic integrity is indeed fundamentally opposed to the ideal “centered self” of a Renaissance laureate). The invocation of a tradition renders conspicuous not just preexisting convention but also, crucially, how the contemporary writer chooses to enact, preserve, modify, or reject its several dimensions within his own social and

³⁸ “[A]s if in that case,” Byron adds, “the gravity did not (in intention at least) heighten the fun.”

literary milieu.³⁹ Regardless of how tongue-in-cheek Byron's poses of (faux-)laureateship in *Don Juan* might be, I believe the emphasis Helgerson places on the interplay between an aspiring laureate and the "generational synchrony" of his literary system (18) provides a suggestive framework for exploring Byron's text.

From the outset, *Don Juan* resounds intensely with the *contemporary*—not in an exclusively biographical or historical sense, although these are certainly strong threads running through the poem, but rather in its persistent juxtaposition of ideals against their current enactments. Thus in the Dedication and periodically afterward, Byron derides the pretensions of Wordsworth, Southey and the other "Lakers," but acknowledges still that a poet is a poet; "You're shabby fellows—true—but poets still, / And duly seated on the immortal hill" (st. 6). Whether we read these lines as sincere or ironic, they suggest that Byron and the "nest of tuneful persons" (st. 1) he scorns are equally implicated birds of a feather. "Epic renegade" is an epithet Byron aims explicitly at Southey in the first stanza of the Dedication, but one could hardly ask for a more fitting epithet for Byron himself. The essential point of struggle articulated in the Dedication and the first two cantos is against the pretension of poetic integrity unaffected by contemporary circumstances, whether the politics of the official post of laureateship or the constraints of commercial poetry publication. And throughout the poem, Byron returns again and again to meditate on ideological and poetic mutability. Being a turncoat is unforgivable—it is the first accusation leveled against Southey, if the mere mention of his laureate title is not—but, transposed into another key, that

³⁹ I paraphrase here Helgerson's main thesis.

transgression becomes the deliberate inconstancy and abrupt wit and pathos of *Don Juan*. Byron makes Southey's alleged sin his poem's strength.

This engagement with the contemporary is important context to bear in mind as we consider Byron shaping the voice(s) of his epic narrator. Having announced that, wanting a hero, he has had to raid the stores of antiquity for one, the narrator continues:

Most epic poets plunge in 'medias res',
 (Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road)
And then your hero tells, whene'er you please,
 What went before—by way of episode,
While seated at dinner at his ease,
 Beside his mistress in some soft abode,
Palace, or garden, paradise, or cavern,
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.

That is the usual method, but not mine—
 My way is to begin with the beginning;
The regularity of my design
 Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
And therefore I shall open with a line
 (Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,
And also of his mother, if you'd rather. (I.6-7)

The almost petulant contrast here is between the method of "most epic poets" and "my way," but these stanzas present some illuminating redefinitions of epic beyond the explicit refusal to begin *in medias res*. First, the assertion of design that forbids "wandering" comes immediately after the assertion of this narrator's alternate way of undertaking epic. A hero's wandering is actually a hallmark of epic, from *The Odyssey* to *The Faerie Queene*, but we may presumably interpret a unity encompassing any erring based on the pursuit of a final objective. This narrator's tangents in topic and tone are not wandering; they are part of the design (in the sense of an objective, if not the

contours of the narrative). Byron may genuinely have had no plan for the narrative of *Don Juan*, then, but that does not preclude his having *designs* on it. “All wandering as the worst of sinning” may not be nearly as ironic as the tone of the stanza suggests.

Also notable in this passage are the two colloquial tags, “whene’er you please” and “if you’d rather.” Like the insistence on undertaking epic “my way,” these tags help to set up a flippant, casual tone, but also do more. The “you” in “whene’er you please” is, in fact, the epic poet; the first stanza summarizes, if offhandedly, how the poet shapes the sense of a hero’s narrative when the epic form has dictated jumping into the middle of things. This too falls under the rejected epic method. “My way” is responsive, though not always amicably, to the influence of the readership, who comprise the “you” in “if you’d rather.” The poem is not wholly or exclusively subject to its readers, but this remark serves as a precursor to a number of other explicit acknowledgements of dependence. That the readership should affect the poem commercially is entirely uncontroversial; that it should affect the poet himself—and be a matter of significance and concern as a result—settles Byron firmly on the laureate turnpike road.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I deliberately mangle the phrase to maintain an emphasis on poetic self-presentation rather than the genre of the poem itself.

Following All the Antique Poets Historically

I will return to the impact of Byron's readership below. For the moment, however, a fuller exploration of Byron's sense of poetic lineage, both for himself and for his poem, may help to clarify the attitude he strikes with respect to his audience. After professing that his narrative is true, thus giving him an advantage over his "epic brethren gone before" (I.202), he continues:

If ever I should condescend to prose,
I'll write poetical commandments, which
Shall supersede beyond all doubt all those
That went before; in these I shall enrich
My text with many things that no one knows,
And carry precept to the highest pitch:
I'll call the work 'Longinus o'er a Bottle,
Or, Every Poet his *own* Aristotle'.

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;
Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,
The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy:
With Crabbe it may be difficult to cope,
And Campbell's Hippocrene is somewhat drouthy:
Thou shalt not steal from Samuel Rogers, nor
Commit—flirtation with the muse of Moore. (I.204-5)

If the one-upping comment about epic predecessors does not give us pause, the irreverence of the "poetical commandments" must. The appropriated formula of commandments lends outrageous self-aggrandizement to the claim of superseding "all those / That went before," as well as imparting devastating clarity to who occupies the place of poetic gods in this scheme, and who the false idols (to say nothing of what

other misdeed might be committed with Moore's muse). Whether moved to anger or amusement, however, we pay attention to such audacity; either way we cannot pass over these new commandments with apathy. This is the benefit of explicitly twisting a conventional formula, and, I think, Byron's point in doing so.

Worth observing here is the proximity of two remarks about superseding poets and guidelines that have come before. As I have noted, acute awareness of precedent is a crucial laureate preoccupation. A brief digression may be useful here: in the *Letter to Raleigh*, printed as part of the prefatory material to *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser describes his choice of Arthurian subject matter, duly elevated and at a distance from the current times. In making this choice, Spenser writes, "I haue followed all the antique Poets historicall" (15).⁴¹ In one sense, this is a description of a contemporary writer's deliberate engagement with and reaction to foregoing literary models in his own work. However, it is also simply a statement of inevitable fact; a poet follows all the poets who have preceded him, whether he wishes to or not. The crucial difference is that one cannot choose a *predecessor*, but one can choose a *model*. Milton, who "closed the tyrant hater he begun" (Ded. 10), thoroughly earned his laurels and worthiness to serve as a *model*.⁴²

⁴¹ I cite the page number in *The Faerie Queene*, eds. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. and C. Patrick O'Donnell, Jr. London: Penguin, 1978, rpt. 1987.

James Bednarz remarks briefly upon the passage from Spenser's letter that I quote, but he considers the statement as a means of self-effacement, expressing the failure of the present to stand up to imported classical models (301).

⁴² Though he uses the word "supersede" in the stanza quoted above, Byron was clearly attentive to the obligations of succession that I describe here, teasing out the polysemy of "success" (continued on the next page):

Well, if I don't succeed, I *have* succeeded,
And that's enough; succeeded in my youth,
The only time when much success is needed:
And my success produced what I in sooth
Cared most about; it need not now be pleaded—

I hasten to observe the distinction between a poetic model and a model for being a poet, and to suggest that Byron sets up Milton, Dryden and Pope as the latter. They provide instances of poetic integrity, both laureate and anti-Laureate, and in this capacity Byron presents them as patterns to follow—not necessarily or exclusively patterns for subject matter or literary aspiration (that is, the kind of poetry they make), but of what a poet is supposed to be. This is the primary contrast drawn between the figures in whom “thou shalt believe” and the Lake Poets; as contemporaries, Byron and the poets he denigrates all have the same predecessors, but, in Byron’s view, the “Lakers” have failed to follow the proper models, a fault even more serious because now they are in the position of being models (false idols) themselves.

However, the poem does not sustain this emphatic and clear-cut opposition for long. The concluding stanza to Canto I is thick with layers of borrowing:

‘Go, little book, from this my solitude!
I cast thee on the waters, go thy ways!
And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,
The world will find thee after many days.’
When Southey’s read, and Wordsworth understood,
I can’t help putting in my claim to praise—
The four first rhymes are Southey’s every line:
For God’s sake, reader! take them not for mine. (I.222)

“Go, little book” is a thoroughly traditional formula, probably originating in Ovid and picked up with great frequency in pre-Romantic literature by poets including Chaucer in the fourteenth century, Skelton and Wyatt in the sixteenth, and Spenser in the

Whate’er it was, ‘twas mine: I’ve paid, in truth,
Of late, the penalty of such success,
But have not learned to wish it any less. (XII.17)

seventeenth.⁴³ Despite the brash exhibition of the excerpt from Southey and the insistence in the last line that the reader not misattribute credit where it is not wanted, the insertion of the quotation works far more to blur the distinction between Byron and Southey than it does to sharpen it. There is a kind of bewildering wit in a direct quotation followed immediately by its belittling, but *before* the identification of the passage as a quotation; Drayton, “borrowing” from Sidney the declaration that he was no pickpurse of another’s wit, at least identified his source before lifting the line. The effect of Byron’s quotation is the reinforcement of the (rather anti-laureate) intimation in the Dedication that, to a point, poets all belong to the same group: that point of differentiation lies in the discernment of the readership.

As I have suggested, the brashness or playfulness of the stanza does not negate the seriousness of this pressing reality of context. Introducing a direct quotation into a new text can fundamentally change its meaning, but the reader must be aware of the imported verse for such an interpolation to have effect. The dismissive tone of the stanza’s last line belies the fact that such a mistake is entirely possible. These lines’ tension springs from the thorny problem that the attribution—the rhymes are “Southey’s every line”—is at once correct and, at least regarding the only really distinctive portion of the quotation, “Go, little book,” quite misleading. On what grounds, then, can this narrative exclamation of individuality be borne out?

⁴³ R. J. Schoeck briefly summarizes the history of the formula in “‘Go Little Book’—A Conceit from Chaucer to George Meredith.” *N&Q* 197 (1952): 370-72, but he does not include Byron’s use among his citations (or Southey’s, for that matter).

We find ourselves once more in the poetry marketplace, considering the interplay of poem, readers, and poet. *Don Juan's* narrator strikes his most carelessly disinterested pose when remarking that the future of the poem "is / Dependent on the public altogether...[though] no great mischief's done by their caprice" (I.199).

Immediately preceding the borrowed envoy, the narrator addresses his audience:

But for the present, gentle reader! and
Still gentler purchaser! the bard—that's I—
Must, with permission, shake you by the hand,
And so your humble servant, and good bye!
We meet again, if we should understand
Each other; and if not, I shall not try
Your patience further than by this short sample—
'Twere well if others follow'd my example. (I.221)

Theatricality and written performance (in the casual letter-closing language in the fourth line) meet in this passage. The self-identification of the "bard" is simultaneously crossed by diametrically opposed laureate and commercial impulses, with the presence of the latter quite undermining the former. On a purely commercial level, whatever distinction a poet can manage is good for business; if, that is, Byron can accentuate his fame and poetic identifiability by means of *Don Juan's* rapid-fire banter and salaciousness, so much the better. As Michael O'Neill usefully observes in his discussion of Byron's self-presentation, "Once a writer has got us interested in his personality (as conveyed in his texts) we are...hooked" (168). If any poet could be said to have an investment in the consequence of this remark, it would be Byron. But the bolstering of a celebrity poetic identity—even for the sake of Byron's differentiation

from his contemporaries, as I have just discussed—is not the paramount concern of the text here.

The stanza turns on the phrase “[I]f we should understand / Each other,” the intersection of the commercial and the intellectual dimensions of poet and reader “coming to an understanding.” This, I believe, is the logic behind *Don Juan*’s “quick succession of fun and gravity,” and the justification of it. Byron does not compose irreverent poetic commandments or abruptly alter tone and register purely to debase tradition or overturn propriety. These rapid shifts, humorous or appalling, are rough so that they might catch onto a reader’s experience. The variability is a means to hook traditions, precepts, conventions, or generalities into individual perception, because only then can they resonate—and only then will we pay enough attention for a poet’s bids for notice to matter at all.

*The Chequered Human Lot*⁴⁴

Thus far, my discussion of *Don Juan* has treated almost exclusively moments of narratorial remark and shifts of tone related directly to the creation and reception of poetry. I would now like to turn to two instances of these shifts which are not explicitly

⁴⁴ In the midst of the cantos describing the horrific siege of Ismail, Byron’s unruffled narrator reminds his audience that he simply “sketch[es] your world exactly as it goes”:

For chequered as is seen our human lot
With good, and bad, and worse, alike prolific
Of melancholy merriment, to quote
Too much of one sort would be soporific [...] (VIII.89)

meta-poetic. Initially, I proposed that consistent tone, whether serious or satiric, runs the risk of losing its hold on a reader's attention, and that variability works to maintain readerly engagement with the text. To carry this suggestion a step farther: variability—of tone, topic, narrative continuity—in *Don Juan* is not only a positive tactic to facilitate interest, but also a defensive one to ward off the numbness of *disinterest*, which is a project that concerns the poet as much as his audience. Byron's claim that the intention informing *Don Juan* is "but to giggle and make giggle," an objective for poet and reader equally, may in fact be utterly serious.

When Juan and Julia finally consummate their relationship, the narrator begs leave for his "chaste Muse" to take a "liberty" by passing over several months (I.120). The narrator builds into his banter the alarmed jump of a "chaster reader" who has presumably anticipated a very different sort of liberty. This twist of expectancy and sidestepping spotlights the digression in the following several stanzas; the putative modesty of a "chaste Muse" has produced a discreet tangent, looking away from Juan and Julia and reflecting on other matters. To a degree, this move is conventional,⁴⁵ but what this narrator supplies to occupy the lull while his protagonist is otherwise occupied deserves note. The six-stanza anaphoric litany bulleted by the repeated phrase "'Tis sweet" (I.122-27) is also traditional after a fashion, at least so far as it dilates

⁴⁵ In *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, once Pandarus has finally put Troilus into Criseyde's bed, Troilus's rhapsodic declarations pass through the central line of the poem (with the illuminating phrase "in so heigh a place" [III.1271]). Once he finally stops talking and the narrator takes over the task of carrying along the narrative, the language is especially abstracted and naïve; the lovers' joys are simply "impossible to my wit to seye." Certainly the pair is "at the feste / Of swich gladnesse...[but] I kan namore" (III.1312-14; text taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

peripheral versions of the topic that would be at hand, if Juan and Julia were still in the narrative viewfinder.

This litany is anything but abstract, and ranges over a startling variety of “sweetness”; nowhere are the narrator’s shifts of register more extreme, or more devastatingly understated:

Sweet is the vintage, when the showering grapes
In Bacchanal profusion reel to earth
Purple and gushing: sweet are our escapes
From civic revelry to rural mirth;
Sweet to the miser are his glittering heaps,
Sweet to the father is his first-born’s birth,
Sweet is revenge—especially to women,
Pillage to soldiers, prize-money to seamen. (I.124)

Rather than abstraction, the narrator spins out a totalizing catalogue of sweetness in every form we might encounter it—carnal, spiteful, sublime, illusory, rapacious, light-hearted, pained, sentimental, sincere. The sheer rapidity of the unfolding examples renders insufficient any label of “tone” that could encompass the passage. But this may be the very point; the disjunctive tone is not a failure of would-be consistency, but instead a sketch of comprehensivity. The exclamation a few stanzas before, “Oh Pleasure! you’re indeed a pleasant thing” (I.119), is wittily meaningless in its tautological abstraction, and stands in conspicuous contrast to the firmly experiential grounding of what is “sweet.”

Capping the passage is the superlative exemplar, “first and passionate love.” The suddenly more stable tone lends startling force: “[I]t stands alone, / Like Adam’s recollection of his fall; / The tree of knowledge has been pluck’d—all’s known— / And

life yields nothing further to recall / Worthy of this ambrosial sin..." (I.127). The potency of this originary sweetness is in its recollection, though crucially, recollection inevitably in light of what experiences have passed in the intervening time, the eclipsing shadow that only makes a corona of light blaze more brightly around it.

But this is too "heigh a place" to linger for long. In the ensuing stanzas, the narrator offers some suggestive puns and natters affably about the miracles of modern-day science and medicine. After the deceptively careless-sounding observation that "Man's a phenomenon, one knows not what" (I.133) the stanza falters in unknowing: "The goal is gain'd, we die, you know—and then—." The potential for crushing despair is present here; the hyphen blurring the end of this stanza is the gaze over a precipice, a long view that threatens paralysis and meaninglessness.

"What then?—" the narrator prompts himself. "I do not know, no more do you— / And so good night.—Return we to our story" (I.134). His tone has fluctuated through suggestiveness, crassness, and droll wit in the preceding half-dozen stanzas, to arguable effect, but the abruptness here is wholly salutary. Here, the absolute abstraction of death—as the only assured endpoint for conceptually organizing experience—threatens in the process to overwhelm all experience.⁴⁶ The jab of his decided return to the story of Juan and Julia, like the parti-colored "'Tis sweet" catalogue, joins variability of tone with variability of experience to parry conceptually fatal consistency. An abstract statement of sweetness (or any other dimension of

⁴⁶ A similar stare into the abyss also occupies the first dozen or so stanzas of Canto XIV, and here too the variety of writing is conjured as a remedy: "In youth I wrote, because my mind was full, / And now because I feel it growing dull" (XIV.10).

existence we might undergo) is useless, or worse, numbing because we cannot relate to it. The alternative to succumbing to this deadening force is the turn back to messy, capricious, bewilderingly inconsistent life: return we to our story.

Canto II closes with a narratorial aria halfway between diatribe and encomium, provoked by Juan's blissful closeness with Haidee and seeming forgetfulness of Julia. The narrator froths: "I hate inconstancy—I loathe, detest, / Abhor, condemn, abjure the mortal made / Of such quicksilver clay that in his breast / No permanent foundation can be laid" (II.209). But the topic of inconstancy carries him:

'Tis the perception of the beautiful,
A fine extension of the faculties,
Platonic, universal, wonderful,
Drawn from the stars, and filter'd through the skies,
Without which life would be extremely dull;
In short, it is the use of our own eyes,
With one or two small senses added, just
To hint that flesh is form'd of fiery dust. (II.212)

It is infuriating, sublime, and unavoidable, a curse and blessing knotted inextricably together, and most importantly, it is a "grand Antithesis to great Ennui" (XV.2). As a narrative enactment of the variability of experience, the poem's protean tone provides an earnest recourse to the threat of dullness implied in the stanza above and periodically throughout the poem.

Potent remedy though it is, however, variability does not always sit well with the narrator's constitution. Beyond Canto II, digestion becomes an increasingly significant motif, particularly its upsetting. The elaborate aristocratic feasts at which Juan sits provide the narrator with plenty of material for lengthy descriptions of the cuisine and

ritual. But the alignment of poetry and feast, the richness of gourmet language—some of the most delectable in the poem—needs abridgement, lest it sicken: “But I have dined, and must forego, alas! / The chaste description even of a ‘Bécasse’ [woodcock]” (XV.71).⁴⁷ Distressing as indigestion may be, however—and it is admittedly no pleasant “inward fate / Which makes all Styx through one small liver flow” (IX.15)—the sheer materiality it signifies is far more often a resource in *Don Juan* than a liability: sampling great variety is worth the risk.

To be sure, constancy (or a less piquant poem) does not by contrast become an evil. Indeed, as I have discussed, laureate tradition offers it up as an ideal recourse. The containment of the demigoddess Mutabilitie is the final note of consolation in the cantos that end *The Faerie Queene*, and Spenser envisions through that action the “stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd / Vpon the pillours of Eternity” (viii.2). In *Don Juan*, constancy is always laced with the danger of paralyzing ennui; at every turn, Byron resists it, using his openly admitted “fault” of digression (III.96) as the current driving his narrative attention ever into new arenas, so that stability cannot become monotony. And, so far as he is able, Byron’s occasionally neglected protagonist participates in the endeavor: Juan resolutely refuses to let the sailors on the sinking ship drink themselves into comforted stupor in the face of terrifying peril (II.35-36), one of a scant few determined actions he manages to accomplish over the course of the

⁴⁷ Notable instances of the indigestion motif occur at IX.14-15; XI.3; XIV.1-2, 30; and XV.62-74. Worth remarking as well is Byron’s use of the language of cooking to describe the creation of his poem. The later cantos include a few striking references to “concocting” (XII.87) and “brewing” (XII.88; XIV.30) verse, “crowd[ing] all into one grand mess” (XV.64). Such a figure—“cooking up a poem”—is particularly suggestive in its conceptualization of incorporating a variety of ingredients into a *sui generis* dish that will savor differently as a composite than its component parts.

poem. *Don Juan* conceivably could have ended after the second canto, however, as the narrator's sarcastic but not unserious reference to the public's caprice indicates. As a potential parting salvo, then, the narrator's combined denunciation and defense of inconstancy gains particular force, as does this bit of narratorial advice:

Man, being reasonable, must get drunk;
The best of life is but intoxication:
Glory, the grape, love, gold, in these are sunk
The hopes of all men, and of every nation;
Without their sap, how branchless were the trunk
Of life's strange tree, so fruitful on occasion:
But to return:—Get very drunk; and when
You wake with head-ache, you shall see what then. (II.179)

“Get very drunk”: not to blunt sensation, but to send it into an intoxicated, rich variation, and to punctuate it with the even richer contrast of a splitting hangover headache. And with this point, I return to Byron's professed intention to giggle and make giggle:⁴⁸ existence—perhaps slightly tipsy—sharpened by variety, and mutually beneficial, even necessary, to poet and reader.

⁴⁸ Nancy Lincoln Easterlin has presented the argument in closest support of the one I make here; she suggests that *Don Juan* illustrates how “the value of writing rests exclusively in the mutual amusement provided writer and reader.... [H]umor that recognizes the essential disjunctiveness of all experience becomes the only valid response to existence, a form of stoicism embodied in the necessary testing of all attitudes and passions” (44-45). While I agree with her analysis in general, I do not find stoicism a particularly compelling means for bringing the poem's humor into focus.

Conclusion

My ambitions for this study are modest. I harbor no illusion that my discussions here might inaugurate a new golden age of widespread Drayton appreciation, or that in the future, critics might discern in Byron's work evidence of secretly earnest laureate ambition. And I will be the first to concede that these two poets make an extraordinarily odd display pair, coming from two such disparate generations and presenting, at least in the works I consider here, such patently antithetical literary personae. I have not, however, placed them beside one another idly; I hoped in considering them together that their very opposition in attitudes of earnestness and carelessness, loftiness and lewdness, scowling and sly winking, might throw into sharper relief a provocative undercurrent of similar concerns about being identifiable as poets, period. If I remark to a friend that some line of poetry is "Draytonian" or "Byronic," how have I come to decide that I know what those adjectives mean? This was the question that catalyzed the present study, and I have two proposals to present as a result of undertaking it.

The first has to do with laureate-spotting. I suggest that we consider a poet's laureate status not by the decisive accomplishment of a list of qualifications (which seems impossible, given the incredibly vexed history of its official, unofficial, honorary, anticipatory, and various other manifestations) but instead by concerns about self-presentational authority that the poet seems to hold with particular interest or unease. Thanks to Helgerson's specialized study as well as the more general histories that preceded him, a student of laureateship has at her disposal a long list of qualities by which a laureate poet can be identified; but many of those qualities have nothing exclusively laureate about them. Certainly a poet who desires notoriety without sacrificing a sense of personal or aesthetic integrity should not be assigned the title purely on those grounds, since "laureate" would become a category nearly as broad as "poet" as a result. Instead, if we consider poets *with respect to* laureateship—and poets whose self-presentation and ambition suggest a high concentration of the qualities Helgerson and others lay out—then we can retain some nuanced specificity in the category without excessively generalizing it or confining it to poets on the payroll. My inclusion of Byron in this study is the best proof I can offer in support of the usefulness of this approach. The "laureate's sty" was a point of concern for him, and his meditations on it resonate strongly with other important themes in his work; it seems only fair to address the preoccupation.

The second proposal amounts to an effort to charge to the rescue of poetry steeped in convention, imitation, and traditional genres. Rather than dismissing openly derivative poetry (as many critics have done regarding *Idea*), I suggest that borrowed

style is no less enlightening a way of articulating poetic interest than radical originality. Drayton knows perfectly well when he is deploying Petrarchan or Sidneian formulae, and he chooses the tactic deliberately. We can give a fairer consideration to Drayton and other poets that are comparatively minor figures in the contemporary canon if we take a step beyond identifying mimicry to ask what use the poet makes of it, and how he works to turn tired and potentially tiring conventionality into an asset.

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