**Byron’s Carnival Mask**

In February 1820, Byron purchased two masks: one for himself, and one for his lover—the married Countess Teresa Guiccioli. They wore their masks several times to the Ravenna Carnival, to which Byron accompanied Guiccioli as her Cavalier Servente—a socially accepted lover of a woman in a marriage of convenience. Byron himself acknowledged the strangeness of such a position: ‘I have been an intriguer, a husband, a whoremonger, and now I am a Cavalier Servente—by the holy! It is a strange sensation’. It was a role which Byron was deeply uncomfortable with, and which he had previously mocked in his poetry, so it is a testament to the strength of his affection for Guiccioli that he was willing to play along. Besides his relationship with Guiccioli and their attendance at the Ravenna Carnival, Byron’s mask can also be understood as representing his time in Ravenna, which was to become increasingly politically charged.

In a letter to his publisher, Byron wrote of Ravenna: ‘Their best things are the Carnival balls and masquerades, when everybody runs mad for six weeks’. A similar enthusiasm, undercut with a clear sense of the hypocrisy of it all, was present in the opening lines of his poem *Beppo* (1818), as he describes the Carnivals of Venice:

’Tis known, at least it should be, that throughout    
All countries of the Catholic persuasion,   
Some weeks before Shrove Tuesday comes about,   
The People take their fill of recreation,   
And buy repentance, ere they grow devout,   
However high their rank, or low their station,   
With fiddling, feasting, dancing, drinking, masking,   
And other things which may be had for asking.

The explicit sexual innuendo of the final line resonates with Byron’s experiences of the Carnival in Ravenna, although, now in love with Teresa Giuccioli, he had committed himself to ‘only the strictest adultery’. The mask has sustained damage since Byron used it almost two hundred years ago, and it now lacks the full beard and hair it once had, but it still retains the eerie visage which would have made Byron an even more formidable presence at the Carnival.

Byron’s life in Ravenna was not simply one of Carnivals and balls; he became involved in the revolutionary activities of the Carbonari—a secret organisation which sought, by any means, to overthrow Austrian rule and establish a Republic in Italy. Byron became increasingly involved in the group, even assuming an honorary position of “Capo” (chief) within the ranks of the “Turba” (mob). At one point, Byron suggested in letters that the Carbonari were storing weapons in the basement of his residence. When the insurrection in 1821 failed, and many of Byron’s friends and comrades were arrested or fled from Ravenna, a disappointed Byron began to think of Greece, and its struggle for independence, as an opportunity to redirect his awakened political ideals. In the meantime, his presence in Ravenna had become untenable, and he left to join Shelley in Pisa.

Byron’s Carnival mask provokes us to think about the kinds of masks which Byron wore throughout his life. Byron invented for himself a particular persona—the world-weary Byronic hero—which he developed in poems such as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. His poetry is always one of performance, which seems to mirror his own life; his intense relationship with Teresa Guiccioli as her Cavalier Servente became just another role to play and another mask to put on. Perhaps only a few individuals, including his half-sister Augusta and, at times, Percy Bysshe Shelley, witnessed Byron with his emotional and intellectual defences down. For all his performance, Byron often strikes a very tragic figure, constantly seeking fulfilment and a meaningful connection, but never finding it. In ‘Epistle to Augusta’—a private poem included in a letter to his half-sister—he expresses this yearning to be ‘without a mask’:

The world is all before me; I but ask

Of Nature that with which she will comply—

It is but in her summer’s sun to bask,

To mingle with the quiet of her sky,

To see her gentle face without a mask

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