



Heroes and Anti-Heroes: Masculine Anxiety in the Romantic Period

Felicity Chilver

In this essay I will outline and explore the way in representations of heroes and anti-heroes in the Romantic period engage with wider anxieties about masculinity, focusing particularly selected works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the 'Dedication' and 'Canto I' of Lord Byron's *Don Juan*. At the time these men were writing, the wars against revolutionary France and political uncertainty at home, as well as abroad, helped to generate a climate of uncertainty and instability surrounding notions of masculinity. Conservative contemporaries such as Edmund Burke argued that 'the age of chivalry is gone' to be replaced with 'that of sophisters, economists, and calculators.'¹ Whilst Richard Polwhele expresses extreme masculine anxiety with regards to women seeking power and control over men, personally attacking Wollstonecraft as a radical female, 'See Wollstonecraft ... o'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim,' before going on to praise 'modest Virtue.'² Byron, in apparently similar fashion to Burke, begins *Don Juan* by lamenting 'I want a hero', in an ironic attempt to summon masculine vigour from a Europe he believes to be so desperately lacking in it.³ Throughout *Don Juan*, but most poignantly in its 'Dedication', Byron satirizes Conservative thought, and the republican turncoats, Southey, Wordsworth and even Coleridge, who have betrayed the cause of the European political ideal of liberty.⁴ In doing so, Byron rejects the popular construction of military heroism celebrated by these men, and by society as a whole, 'when every year and month sends forth a new one', and opts to create his own anti-hero in the form of 'our ancient friend Don Juan,' for the purpose of attacking such blind and idol worship of so-called masculinity.⁵ Whilst Don Juan is established as comedic anti-hero, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner undergoes several shifts in heroic status throughout the course of the poem. Initially, he is portrayed as a solitary and powerful story-teller, who was hailed a hero by his men for shooting the bird that brought 'the fog and mist', before undergoing an immense fall from grace upon the realisation that he has destroyed 'the bird of good luck.'⁶ Don Juan and the Ancient Mariner can be viewed in direct contrast to the inward-facing man of sentimentality featured in Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' and 'Frost at Midnight' who discover from nature romantic inspiration and a sense of masculine pride and empowerment.

Byron's mock-epic *Don Juan* is reflexively concerned with its genre, as the powerful narrative voice comically reevaluates the mundane and refreshingly abandons claim to absolute knowledge⁷, 'What then? I do not know, no more do you?'⁸ Indeed, those who do claim knowledge, for example 'Coleridge [...] explaining metaphysics to the nation', are mercilessly mocked in the originally unpublished 'Dedication', 'I wish he [Coleridge] would explain his explanation.'⁹ Byron particularly attacks the Poet Laureate Robert Southey, condemning his hypocrisy and pretension, and going as far

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.76.

² Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females*, (Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Range 1031), p.13.

³ Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (l:1), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3rd edition, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⁴ Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. By James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.45.

⁵ Byron, (l: 1).

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Poems*, ed. by Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1992), (Part: II).

⁷ Drummond Bone, 'Childe Harold IIV, Don Juan and Beppo' in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.157-169.

⁸ Byron, (l: 134).

⁹ Byron, (Dedication: 2).

as suggesting his writing to be an expression of inadequate masculinity,¹⁰ 'because you soar too high, Bob, / And fall for lack of moisture, quite a dry-Bob.'¹¹ By attacking hypocrisy, Byron here demonstrates the way in which the alleged masculine honour of his contemporaries, the turncoat poets who celebrate military heroes such as 'Vernon', 'Wolfe', 'Hawke' and 'Howe', has degenerated into a means for oppression, 'States to be curbed and thoughts to be confined.'¹² Additionally, by using vocabulary associated with the pageant of warfare, as well as its nationalism, 'epic renegade', 'glory your conversion brought',¹³ Byron contemptuously reveals the way in which military glory and fame has replaced true patriotism and altruistic aspiration for liberty.¹⁴ In selecting Don Juan, a 'pantomime' libertine 'sent to the devil' for his hero, and declaring that there is no other adequate or suitable man 'in the present age', Byron undercuts the esteem bestowed upon military heroes. Far from reaching the accepted standard of masculinity that prized rationality, physical strength, taciturnity and utility¹⁵, Don Juan represents an exceptionally ordinary individual; an anti-hero who is consistently confounded in his determination and fate, and comically pursued by disaster.¹⁶

Whilst Byron's Juan is an established anti-hero, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner is portrayed with a degree of masculine power and reserve, capable of commanding attention and audience solely with 'his glittering eye.'¹⁷ The Mariner, in shooting the albatross, asserts masculine dominance over Nature, an entity conventionally constructed as female as exemplified in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, 'Nature there/ Exhibited by putting forth ... That domination which she oftentimes/ Exerts.'¹⁸ In doing so, the Mariner arrogantly elevates his status to that of above creation, equating himself with god-like power and the ability to control life and death. Having shot the bird, the mariner's heroic status undergoes a multitude of shifts; from this god-like position, to the villain who shot 'the bird of good luck', to celebrated hero having actively destroyed the cause of 'the fog and mist.'¹⁹ Coleridge in this way highlights the fickleness of fame, comparing the way in which the men on the ship are blindly drawn to the Mariner's misplaced power of destruction, with that of the blind pursuit of war in a time of peace, 'Heroes, that for your peaceful country perished.'²⁰ Byron, in *Don Juan*, similarly condemns the approval of violence in pursuit of fame, 'What is the end of fame? [...] For this men write, speak, preach, and heroes kill', as well as attacking the blinkered political conversion of Romantic poets from radicals to conservatives, including that of Coleridge himself, 'like a hawk encumbered with his hood.'²¹ In illustrating the changeability of human admiration, particularly when the initial esteem is unfounded or misplaced, Coleridge and Byron demonstrate the way in which heroism and masculinity alter in accordance with external factors.

The sublime, for Coleridge, is related to the 'cognition of a holy spirit or natural power that animates both the landscape', as well as the man.²² By having arrogantly asserted his dominance over the natural landscape, the Mariner has failed to recognise the natural power connected to and present within the albatross 'as if it had been a Christian soul', and, in shooting it, severs the link between the

¹⁰ Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Masculinity, Gender, Politics and Poetics in the Writings of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p.152.

¹¹ Byron (Dedication: 3).

¹² Byron, (Dedication: 14).

¹³ Philip W. Martin, 'Heroism and History' in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.84.

¹⁴ Caroline Franklin, 'Quiet Cruising o'er the Ocean Woman': Byron's *Don Juan* and the Woman Question', in *Byron*, ed. by Jane Stabler (London: Longman, 1998), p.86.

¹⁵ Julie Carlson, 'Gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.212.

¹⁶ McGann, p.25.

¹⁷ Coleridge, (Part I).

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (United States: Norton, 1979) p.462.

¹⁹ Coleridge, (Part II).

²⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", 'Frost at Midnight', and 'France: An Ode' from *Poetical Works (1834)* in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3rd edition, ed. by Duncan Wu, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p.632.

²¹ Byron, (Canto I: 218 and Dedication: 2).

²² Anne, K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (United States: Routledge, 1993), p.89.

men on the ship and nature.²³ In upsetting the natural balance, I would argue that the gruesome events, including the deaths of his shipmates, are a direct consequence of the Mariner's ignorant actions; where the literal 'Spirit' of the natural world, and by extension the spirit of Romantic sublimity, seeks retribution until the Mariner reaches spiritual enlightenment. Only through an unconscious acceptance and appreciation of natural sublimity, 'no tongue/ Their beauty might declare', is the link restored and Mariner freed from his torment. The shift in the Mariner's perspective from dominant, masculine gaze to an enlightened perception of sublimity is most apparent in his interpretation of 'the water-snakes', which go from being grotesque vermin, 'slimy things did crawl with legs', to 'happy living things' 'of shining white.'²⁴ Coleridge, then, advocates for universal sentimentality, with Romanticism and the Romantic spirit as forms of masculine empowerment exceeding conventional notions of masculinity.²⁵ Whilst Coleridge suggests that the Mariner becomes humbled and passive after discovering an appreciation and 'love' for the natural world, Wordsworth in the 1800 reprint of *Lyrical Ballads* lamented the Mariner's total lack of active agency stating, 'The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects ... that he [The Mariner] does not act, but is continually acted upon.'²⁶ Wordsworth thus highlights concern surrounding the portrayal of masculinity and heroism as sentimental and passive where, historically, the emotions of 'love' and sensibility had been assigned to the feminine gender.²⁷

Whilst Coleridge promotes the centrality of love to human experience and masculine sentimentality involving emotional intensity and openness, he does not, as Wordsworth implies, propose a subversion of gender conventions.²⁸ Indeed, most of Coleridge's comments on gender supported social conservatism, positioning women in the private sphere, with men in the public.²⁹ I argue that a form of masculine anxiety manifests itself in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* through the portrayal of 'The Nightmare Life-in-Death', a female character who, because she asserts her independence over the men, must therefore be defined as evil.³⁰ The depiction of Life-in-Death as both grotesque and seductive, 'Her lips where red, her looks were free, / Her locks were yellow as gold: / Her skin was white as leprosy,'³¹ mirrors the earlier description of the bride, 'red as a rose is she'³², thus illustrating an anxiety over the nature of marriage. During the time Coleridge was writing, women were viewed as 'mistresses' for men rather than 'companions', therefore the likening of the bride with Life-in-Death could signal a masculine fear of domesticity, as well as fear surrounding an autonomous female form carrying with it death and plague.³³ In this way, Coleridge expresses a subtle, but evident, masculine anxiety concerning married life, and the stagnation it brings, as the end to a man's life of liberty.

Whilst 'love' for creation and the Romantic sublime are directly related to masculine empowerment in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Byron in *Don Juan* conversely writes that 'Man's love is of his life a thing apart.'³⁴ For Byron, masculinity is not related to an appreciation of the beautiful, but indicated rather by a struggle for power and the search for truth beneath a parade of apparent openness. In fact, Byron parodies the poetry of love and sentimentalism, 'using Juan's love-sickness to burlesque Wordsworthian responses to nature'³⁵, 'He, Juan (and not Wordsworth), so pursued / His self-communion with his own high soul.'³⁶ Rather than focusing on sentimental masculinity, Byron uses the

²³ Coleridge, (Part I).

²⁴ Coleridge, (Parts II and IV).

²⁵ Fulford, p.18.

²⁶ William Wordsworth, 'Note to *Ancient Mariner* in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)', in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797 – 1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.791.

²⁷ Mellor, p.28.

²⁸ McGann, pp.59-60.

²⁹ Carlson, p.203.

³⁰ Mellor, p.28.

³¹ Coleridge (Part III).

³² Ibid, (Part I).

³³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.260.

³⁴ Byron, (I: 194).

³⁵ Duncan Wu, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3rd edition, ed. by Duncan Wu, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p.958, n.99.

³⁶ Byron, (I: 91).

libertine tradition and its language in order to demonstrate the way in which sexual prowess is not simply an 'extended metaphor for politics', but rather that the struggle for masculine dominance is comical and futile.³⁷ This argument is outlined through the slapstick fight over honour and integrity between two half-naked men, the irony and pointlessness of the conflict being that in exposing Julia's lover, Don Alfonso exposes himself as 'the thing he most abhorred', a cuckolded husband.³⁸ In this way Don Alfonso represents a figure of double meaning within the poem who, contrasted to Julia's open lies, conceals his own deceptions beneath a double standard of openness and truth³⁹, 'Alfonso's loves with Inez were well-known.'⁴⁰ Don Juan and Don Alfonso additionally represent contrasting, but equally valid, figures of masculinity; with Don Alfonso signifying the mature, rational husband and Don Juan the youthful, passionate lover. During the struggle, between 'Alfonso in his dressing down' and a 'half-smothered' Juan, both men reveal themselves to be wholly inept fighters, 'Juan contrived to give an awkward blow', before an opportunistic Juan escapes 'naked' into 'the night.'⁴¹ During the conflict, neither man asserts dominance over the other or wins back their honour or esteem, but rather both are left appearing foolish, with the dissolution of male power clearly evident in the humiliating loss of apparel to both parties.⁴² Byron's Juan, in this episode, is not the traditional libertine as sexual predator, but an individual expressing sexuality as the result of innocent spontaneity.⁴³ Byron here demonstrates the way in which the expression of such guiltless sentiments, whilst condemnable by society, are in fact less morally harmful to the individual 'than the separation of his private from his public life to facilitate the concerns of policy.'⁴⁴ In contrast to Juan, Don Alfonso does just this, by inviting his public life, 'torches, friends, and servants in great number,' into his private, in an attempt to humiliate his wife, only to come away just as, if not more, 'foolish' than she.⁴⁵ Thus, Byron condemns the mode of masculinity overly concerned with the public affairs of 'pride, fame, ambition,' and suggests through his 'hero's' continual pursuit of women, that by adopting the more feminised role of a life dedicated to love, 'love ... 'Tis woman's whole existence'⁴⁶, a sort of innocence and natural goodness can be retained.⁴⁷

Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' and 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison' similarly portray, and arguably advocate for, a break away from society, and a masculinity stemming from the adoption of a more domesticated role. 'This Lime Tree Bower' was written in 1797, when Coleridge is prevented from accompanying his friends on a walk having 'met with an accident.'⁴⁸ The poet laments having lost 'Beauties and feelings, such as would have been / Most sweet to my remembrance', portraying, as in *The Ancient Mariner*, a natural world capable of generating 'feelings' of sublimity and poetic inspiration. The regenerative power of nature is further indicated as we discover that what is lost to the poet's physical eye, is gained through the eye of romantic imagination, carrying with it a transformative power⁴⁹; the 'lime-tree bower' goes from being the poet's 'prison', to his comfort, 'This little lime-tree bower.'⁵⁰ It could be argued that Coleridge, therefore, advocates for a more natural and sentimental approach to masculinity, whilst condemning the 'evil and pain / And strange calamity' unavoidable when pursuing the more conventional masculine engagement with society and politics in 'the great city.'⁵¹

³⁷ Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Political and the Romantic Author*, (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.59.

³⁸ Byron (l: 139).

³⁹ McGann, p.68.

⁴⁰ Byron (l: 176).

⁴¹ Byron (l: 165 -188).

⁴² Susan J. Wolfson "'Their She Condition': Cross-dressing and the Politics of Gender' in *Don Juan, in Byron*, ed. By Jane Stabler (London: Longman, 1998), p.96.

⁴³ McGann, pp.87-88.

⁴⁴ Franklin, p.86.

⁴⁵ Byron, (l: 138).

⁴⁶ Ibid, (l: 194).

⁴⁷ Franklin, p.86.

⁴⁸ Coleridge, p.613.

⁴⁹ Paul Magnuson, 'The 'Conversation' Poems' in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. by Lucy Newlyn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp.38-39.

⁵⁰ Coleridge, p.613 and 617.

⁵¹ Coleridge, p.615.

Coleridge more explicitly explores a masculine, domesticated way of life and power of sentimental values in 'Frost at Midnight', where the poet, in his cottage on a winter's evening, is alone with his son.⁵² The setting is quaint and quiet, the poet's own home, and the portrayal of the speaker is one of adoring and attentive father, 'My babe so beautiful, it fills my heart' / With tender gladness thus to look on thee.'⁵³ Here, in stark contrast to the masculinity portrayed in *The Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge demonstrates the way in which pure and innocent love for a child can inspire feelings of masculine pride and empowerment in similar fashion to the natural world, and the way these feelings, as in 'Lime Tree Bower', are capable of igniting romantic imagination, 'The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language.'⁵⁴ Despite the joy and pride felt from being with his son, the poet does, however, express perceivable masculine anxiety concerning his domesticity. Indeed, with the exception of this poem, no other man in Coleridge's 'Conversation' poems or *Lyrical Ballads* is found indoors, suggesting an exclusive link between masculinity and nature, and that a man's place is outdoors, whilst woman's indoors.⁵⁵ Additionally, whilst the poet as a result of his captivity 'brooded' indoors 'all the following morn', there is a subtler suggestion that domesticity equates with stagnation. This indication is found in the 1798 version of the poem where the 'deep calm' of later versions is shown to have been altered from the original 'dead calm.'⁵⁶ The original 'dead calm' connotes the deathliness of inactivity felt by the speaker, and way in which his child's 'gentle breathings' provide relief from the stagnation of his mind, 'vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought.'⁵⁷ I would argue that 'Frost in Midnight' and 'This Lime-Tree Bower' demonstrate the way in which Coleridge advocates for a private, masculine lifestyle, distinguishing him from other radicals who insist on direct engagement with politics, and who reject contemporary conventions of gender. Whereas Coleridge remains traditional in his stance on women as maternal, nurturing and dependent figures; whilst instructing that masculine empowerment and fulfilment can be sourced directly from a close relationship with nature.⁵⁸

In this essay I have outlined representations of masculinity and heroism within selected works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Byron, demonstrating the way in which different manifestations of masculinity engage with and portray varying degrees of masculine anxiety. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* initially represents a more traditional version of masculinity. However, after shooting the albatross and severing his link with the natural world, the Mariner undergoes numerous shifts in heroic status, exposing the fickleness of fame, before he reaches Romantic enlightenment through an unselfconscious expression of love for the natural world. Coleridge thereby condemns masculine assertion through the pursuit of glory by violent means, and advocates that a more sentimental approach to masculinity can lead to greater empowerment through Romantic enlightenment and imagination. Byron's *Don Juan*, on the other hand, represents a less conventional form of masculinity, portrayed as an anti-hero from the poem's commencement. In the 'Dedication' Byron attacks the masculine military ethos celebrated by his contemporaries, before going on to demonstrate the futility of pursuing masculine power and dominance.⁵⁹ Byron, in *Don Juan*, demonstrates the way in which the impotence of his 'masculine' contemporaries bears political consequences amounting to a sense of self-repression which, as a result, led them to support a repressive government.⁶⁰ In rejecting the celebrated convention and creating his own endearing anti-hero, Byron advocates for the adoption of a more feminised form of masculinity, championing sexual promiscuity as free love, over the 'glory' of violence. Finally, and more subtly, Coleridge portrays a form of domestic masculinity in his poems 'Frost at Midnight' and 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' portraying the way in which masculine pride and empowerment can be discovered, as in *The Ancient Mariner*, away from society and through a close relationship with the natural world. Whilst supporting a variety of forms of masculinity, Byron and

⁵² Magnuson, p.39.

⁵³ Coleridge, p.627.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp.627-629.

⁵⁵ Carlson, p.206.

⁵⁶ Coleridge, pp.626-627.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Carlson, p.203.

⁵⁹ Franklin, p.89.

⁶⁰ Fulford, p.152.

Coleridge additionally reveal subtle forms of masculine anxiety. Coleridge, in *The Ancient Mariner*, as well as in his 'Conversation' poems, expresses anxiety surrounding masculine death and stagnation in the acceptance of a more domesticated lifestyle. Byron, on the other hand, expresses a masculine anxiety of a different nature, and one that, in an extension of this essay I would explore in greater depth; that of a castration complex surrounding the editorial decisions of his publishers regarding *Don Juan*. This anxiety is expressed in his letter to John Murray, April 6th 1819; 'I will have none of your damned cutting and slashing,'⁶¹ with Murray's at censorship comparative with an attack on the body, and its possible violation.⁶² To conclude, whilst expressing varying forms of masculinity and masculine anxiety, both Coleridge and Byron use masculinity in order to attack convention and condemn the glorified, hyper masculine military hero, who gains power and fame through the murder of innocent victims.

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⁶¹ Lord Byron, *Selected Letters & Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand (London: Pimlico, 1993), p.189.

⁶² Hofkosh, pp.59-60.

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