

BYRON'S ORIENTAL WARDROBE

Bernard Beatty

At Yanina, in 1809, Byron and his friend Hobhouse summoned a tailor and tried on Albanian dresses “as fine as Pheasants”. Byron eventually bought some “very magnifiques” Albanian dresses and boasted to his mother of the bargain that he had found – “They cost 50 guineas each, and have so much gold, they would cost in England two hundred”. Byron had his picture painted (by Thomas Philips) in one of these Albanian or Souliote costumes, and that is, probably, the full extent of his “oriental wardrobe”. But, thirteen years later, Byron is still using Oriental costume in his poetry. This essay addresses the question “What does Byron use oriental costume for?”

We can distinguish four kinds of concern with clothing in Byron's poetry, and one of these will need further subdivision. Byron's references to costume are frequent, judicious, but not ubiquitous. In *Manfred*, for instance, clothing is unimportant. Byron knows when he is using costume and when he is not. It is one thing for an Albanian to wear Albanian costume and quite another for an English travelling gentleman to do the same. Byron is interested in both these ways of dressing. We can label them, respectively, the social and the transgressive. Byron himself could deliberately call attention to himself as an Englishman abroad rather than disguise himself as a denizen. He was observed in Istanbul wearing “a scarlet coat, richly embroidered with gold ... with 2 heavy epaulettes – a feathered, cocked hat”. These two attitudes to clothing, social and transgressive, are second and third in my list of four.

In the first instance, costume is an inverted sign of nudity. It hides nudity but makes that possibility explicit. Byron's goose, tame bear, or wolf are neither clothed nor naked. Like Adam and Eve before the Fall, they know neither condition. We post-lapsarians know both as a founding condition of human life. Costume, in part, is a sign of shame for nudity. Ben Bunting in *The Island* retains the remnants of his clothing anxiously “A curious sort of somewhat scanty mat / Now served for inexpressibles and hat” (II, 481-2). He does this because Neuha and the islanders are shamelessly naked and do not know about “inexpressibles”. *The Island* is largely about whether human beings should be, could be, or should desire to be naked or clothed. Similarly, in Byron's *Mazeppa*, the hero's nudity is a sign of his sexual freedom – he shares the condition of wild horses – but it is also a sign of transgression, shame and punishment (exposure for ridicule). Conversely, clothing – sign of Adam's shame – may also be a means of displaying the body to better advantage. Juan's clothing is frequently presented in this way – in Canto IX of *Don Juan* he wears “White stockings drawn uncurdled as new milk / O'er limbs whose symmetry set off the silk ...” (IX, 43).

Clothing may imply transformation, even a kind of deification, as in many religious rituals. This is the most basic level of dress, where we see the intimate relation of clothing with the body's shame and glory, and clothing's capacity to extend and call attention to the body's role as sign. Byron is intelligently interested in all of this, but it is insufficiently oriental – for our present purposes. Let us examine levels two and three.

Social use of costume is the most straightforward of all. Our clothes reveal our gender, our culture, our status, and our date. Byron chose to wear an Albanian noble costume not that of an Albanian cook. The pictures in Norman Abbey show

Steel Barons, molten the next generation
To silken rows of gay and garter'd Earls ... (XIII, 68)

The character of these costumes tells us that they were barons and when they lived. They dressed in armour until the seventeenth century and then changed to exactly dateable forms of civil attire. Byron wittily maintains the same perspective in *The Vision of Judgement* where the cloud of witnesses come dressed in the costumes (arbitrary in this atemporal perspective) of their various historical periods:

... Drest in a fashion now forgotten quite;
For all the fashions of the flesh stick long
By people in the next world; where unite
All the costumes since Adam's, right or wrong,
From Eve's fig-leaf down to the petticoat,
Almost as scanty, of days less remote. (*The Vision*, 66)

Few poets could write so deftly and thoughtfully about clothing as this. In Norman Abbey, similarly, there are – pictured on the walls – judges “in formidable ermine”, bishops, generals, countesses “in robes and pearls”, and – in the grounds – “the sportsman beats in russet jacket” (Canto XIII, 47, 48, 85). Tepelene in Canto I of *Childe Harold* shows the Oriental equivalent – wild Albanians “kirtled to the knee” and the “crimson-scarfed men of Macedon”. Here, Byron sketches in variegated historical societies through costume much as Scott does in his poems and novels, or more embryonically, Fielding.

There is a palpable difference between Oriental and European costume nevertheless. In Norman Abbey there is some relishing, on Byron's part, of the historical society presented, but mostly we are aware of ironical distancing. History is almost phantasmagoric. Steel armour melts into garters. How absurd, given such fluidity, to attach much value to either. In Tepelene, however, the costume of a similarly hierarchical and historical society is relished without qualification. That is surely conservative in some sense. The point is worth stressing.

Orientalism is subversive and radical for Europeans because it is “other”. To wear Moslem costume may involve becoming a Moslem and, in any case, imagining non-European modes of behaviour and value. When Juan and Johnson are being dressed by Baba he suggests that they be circumcised (*Don Juan* V, 69). The costume bespeaks the allegiance. We see this again in *Beppo*. When Beppo returns and takes off his Moslem attire, the Patriarch re-baptises him. Byron's professed admiration for Turkish society is, like that of his championing of Napoleon, intentionally subversive. English readers are invited to imagine being the enemy in both cases. But, paradoxically, Byron's subversiveness has a conservative undertow. Byron relishes the differential organisation of Moslem societies as displayed in costume. Here, for instance, his delight in the organised variety of Ali Pasha's world (*Childe Harold* I, 55-68) is of a piece with his respect for the ordered hierarchical world (“Strict restraint”) of the Royal Navy ship on which Harold travels in Canto II – and with Byron's own manipulations of costume decorum. When Byron's detested mother-in-law died, he surprised his visitors by refusing to receive them and put all his servants into mourning garb. In other words, Byron can and does use a vividly realised Oriental world as a vehicle for his partly repressed conservatism. His huge and increasing delight in Walter Scott's novels is partly to be explained by this as is the late nostalgic evocation of his own childhood in Scotland – “Scotch plaids, Scotch snoods, the blue hills and clear streams” (*Don Juan* X, 18) where natural landscape and identified social costume fit together without jarring just as they do in romantic Albania.

If we switch from Albanians wearing Albanian costume to Byron doing the same, we move to costume as a form of transgression. This is level three, the most obvious and complex of Byron's use of costume. It will need to be sub-divided into three. First of all there is transgression simply as such. We can call it, as Byron often does, “crime”. A good example is Alp in *The Siege of Corinth*. He wears Turkish costume and is a renegade. An opposed case is that of Juan and Johnson changing out of their oriental costumes (Juan wears at least four of these from Canto II-VII) in order to attack the side they have just come from. Byron is careful not to show us this change of costume and allegiance but when Juan comes before Catherine the Great in Canto IX, we are told that Juan is now dressed in a scarlet coat with black facings, yellow breeches and white stockings. This uniform is then wittily turned into a burlesque outfit of Cupid's. Changing costumes may thus be a form of betrayal but it may, secondly, be a form of disguise. Selim, in

The Bride of Abydos, takes Zuleika to a transformation scene in the grotto which reveals that his

His robe of pride was thrown aside,
His brow no high-crown'd turban bore,
But in its stead a shawl of red ... (2, 131-3)

This costume change goes with a change of weaponry. Selim no longer bears arms “such as wield / The turban'd Delis in the field” but pistols and a sabre with a cloak of white, greaves for his legs, and a golden vest like a cuirass. Byron puts a note claiming that his dress is based on his own observations of Turkish sailors, but the greaves are those of an Arnaut robber. The association of dress and weaponry is normally significant in Byron's writings. In this case, there is something effeminate in the discarded oriental dagger “on whose hilt the gems were worthy of a diadem”. By contrast, the pistols of his new garb are “unadorned”. They go with Selim's new assertiveness. The association of Eastern costume with effeminacy is pursued in *Sardanapalus* (Eastern if not Moslem) and in *Don Juan*. The Russian General Suwarrow's plain attire in *Don Juan* is, for instance, a sign of wonder to the oriental party accompanying the escaped Juan. The most striking example of weapon and costume conjunction is in the final sections of *The Island* where the mutineer, Fletcher Christian, bereft of ammunition, uses a button from his “vest” as a bullet, and smiles “as his foe fell” (IV, 135). The costume is literally a killing one.

The Oriental Tales are full of costumes used as disguises. *The Giaour*, for instance, presents a backdrop of fixed costumes as a marker for exchanged use. The Moslem fisherman guides us expertly through the standard markings like a practised ornithologist – “an emir by his garb of green”, a tartar “conspicuous by his yellow cap” Against these fixities, the giaour is recognised, in spite of his disguise, “by his jet-black barb” though the giaour himself is “now array'd in Arnaut garb / Apostate from his own vile faith”. He has crossed over into an oriental world by loving, then revenging Leila. His disguise is difficult to disentangle from his transgression. Conversely, Leila (according to the tale the Nubians tell) had left her Moslem husband to seek her lover “in likeness of a Georgian page”. The costume signals a double transgression of allegiance (marital/cultural) and gender. In *The Giaour*, oriental and monastic costumes are separated but paralleled. Though dressed as an Arnaut, he is not received as a Moslem. Though finally dressed as a Christian monk, he is not received as one.

The most complex instance of disguise in the Tales is that of Conrad in *The Corsair*. His assumption of the dress of a Moslem holy man is necessary to the plot but seems to work beneath the surface of the poem as well. Somehow it links with his rescue of Gulnare from the burning harem which seems to be a weakening of his male apartness. This is carefully balanced by the quasi-masculine force of the rebellious murderess that Gulnare becomes. It is Conrad's shift of costume – as much as anything – that kills the wholly passive Medora. It signals a doubleness of role incompatible with her unicity and, by the same token, an unspoken complicity with Gulnare as betrayer.

Costume change as transgression and disguise serve the purposes of Byronic heroes, but costume change can also be the means whereby they get their comeuppance. *Beppo* centres in this. Here, for once, oriental costume is a sign of apartness and masculinity. In Venice, Laura presides over a world of discriminated female costume :

She then surveys, condemns, but pities still
Her dearest friends for being drest so ill.

One has false curls, another too much paint,
A third – where did she buy that frightful turban? (*Beppo*, 65-6)

The turban mentioned here is presumably either fancy dress, or a new fashion, ransacking the fixities of historical costume, as always, for diverse erotic effects. Men in this Venice are the

servants of feminine appearance and therefore costume, much as they are in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. We see Laura's Count, for instance, "at her elbow with her shawl". Beppo's oriental taciturnity, his refusal to be cowed whilst at the same time gazing tenderly at his wife, testifies to a claim like that of Conrad with Medora, or Rupert Birkin in Lawrence's *Women In Love*. Beppo wishes to be in love with a woman but, like Conrad and Birkin, preserve his masculine apartness. He wishes to remain the loyal but untethered "stranger" that his outsider costume suggests. The poem's sequence makes us highly sympathetic to this but, needless to say, we and Beppo are to encounter the reversal habitual in comedy, which always renders such apartness ludicrous. Almost Laura's first move when she understands that the stranger is her returned husband is to make him shave his beard off and undress: "You shan't stir from this spot / In that queer dress". In no time at all he is rebaptised, and then

He then threw off the garments which disguised him
And borrowed the Count's small-clothes for a day ... (*Beppo*, 98)

Orientalised Beppo, unlike renegade Alp, is kitted out as a Christian and European again in the small clothes, perhaps even the underwear, of his wife's accredited lover. We are bound to laugh at this, but the comic submission is as poignant and telling as the refused obedience dramatised in great tragedies. Beppo is dressed by his wife, and accepts the role which she assigns to him. This is the first time that this has happened in Byron's poetry, but it is not the last. In *Mazeppa*, written not long afterwards, the hero sent forth "to the wilderness / Bound, naked, bleeding, and alone" swoons and awakes to a pretty girl's face. A civilising pillow is under his head. There, we're told, he is brought to life again. This is like a trial run for Juan's awaking from mimic death and his clothing by Haidee in *Don Juan II*, which in turn links forward to Juan's later clothing by the eunuch in the harem (Canto V). These are the two most densely worked instances of Byron's oriental wardrobe, and we must read them carefully. Before we do so we will need to articulate Byron's third use of costume. We have instanced crime and disguise, but there is also costume's implication in the world of play and masquerade.

Venice, centre of carnival, offers costume change as play. Laura's Venice is the obverse side of Byron's two Venetian tragedies, *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, where the Doges are seen as imprisoned in their official costume and role. Into this world of carnival comes a figure in carnival oriental costume – Beppo – who is playing it for real. Two of the most common Regency masquerade costumes seem to have been the oriental and the monastic. Byron used the latter himself and of course at Newstead had hired "Monks' dresses from a masquerade warehouse". His own Albanian rig-out – bought for real, like Beppo's – was soon discarded and given to Miss Mercer Elphinstone for use in a masquerade. The implication may be that she is to wear it herself, thus again bringing together oriental dress and gender transgression.

So we come to Juan and Haidee. We used to be told that they represented an idyll of natural love as opposed to the social conventions of marriage, seduction, and adultery normal in "patriarchal" Seville. May be so. It is certainly true that Haidee in Canto II

... asked no vows,
Nor offer'd any; she had never heard
Of plights and promises to be a spouse ...

... And, never having dreamt of falsehood, she
Had not one word to say of constancy. (II, 190)

Also in Canto IV

They were alone once more; for them to be

Thus was another Eden ... (IV, 10)

It comes as something of a shock, then, to be reminded that In Canto III, Juan wears a turban and presides, much as Sardanapalus does, over an apparently reconstituted social, festive, world that looks as though it rests secure in Nature's abundance – like Torquil and Neuha's Otaheite – but does not. It is, on the contrary, a world of clothes and crime. It is Lambro's island. It is as though Otaheite really belongs to the guilty mutineers, and not to the primeval Neuha. As they wear clothes, they belong ineluctably to history. Torquil, in *The Island*, escapes into Neuha's domain, leaving his clothes behind as Juan does when he flees from Julia's bedroom. But, unlike Torquil, Juan rejoins clothes and history. All clothes place us in time and are our place in time. Steel barons, gay and garter'd earls frozen into pictures pinpoint their eras. John Wilkes in the sky of *The Vision of Judgement* wears the clothes fashionable at the time of his death. So Juan and Haidee are placed implicitly by the Isles of Greece song and singer who sees through their clothes – “To think such breasts must suckle slaves”. Greeks or Spaniards in Turkish clothes must be slaves or renegades, even though the island looks like Eden. The song's introduction follows immediately on the eight-stanza description of Haidee's, then Juan's, outfit. This is by far the longest description of clothes in Byron's verse. Haidee wears silk full Turkish trousers and “a like gold bar above her instep roll'd / Announced her rank” (III, 72). She is “Princess of her father's land”. This Eden is not Eden, because it belongs to the transgressing father. Lambro is a returning Beppo whose dark claim to devotion will, this time, be made good. Father and daughter will eventually lie together in “that Isle ... all desolate and bare” (IV, 72) which, it turns out, repeats all too exactly the transformation of Eden from fruitfulness to death. Juan and Haidee's child, the “fair and sinless child of sin” (IV, 70), is stillborn. Lambro himself captures and sells slaves. He has the cunning, self-control, and the get-up of an Ali Pasha (*Childe Harold* I), he is a pirate like Conrad, and a renegade like Alp:

His country's wrongs, and his despair to save her
Had stung him from a slave to an enslaver. (III, 53)

But, like Alp, he can recall what he has abandoned:

But something of the spirit of Old Greece
Flashed o'er his soul a few heroic rays ... (III, 55)

Juan is therefore kitted out by Haidee in the Turkish clothes of her father's tainted land. This already presages Byron's master-stroke in Canto IV, where Lambro and Juan fuse together in Haidee's dream as Love and Death.

The first time that Juan is clothed by Haidee he is, in effect, naked. This is the most fundamental level of clothing (where this essay started) and we can see how intimately clothing is associated with nudity as desirable, innocent, glorious, and shame-ridden. It is the harbinger of civilisation, titillation, and defilement. It is instructive here that the first mention of Juan's clothing, apart from his tale-telling shoes, is in the fight with Alfonso:

And then his only garment quite gave way;
He fled, like Joseph, leaving it ... (I, 186)

Juan is, therefore, in a splendid phrase, “naked, favoured by the night” (I, 188). He is naked again, like Mazeppa virtually dead, in Canto II after the shipwreck, and then he is re clothed by Haidee. There is almost a mythic sequence underlying Byron's procedures if we stand back from them a little. Mazeppa, naked, virtually dead, strapped to wild horses, is awakened to life by a young girl who tends him. Juan, naked, virtually dead from the sea, is awakened by a young girl

who gives him food and clothing and makes a large fire out of the planks of shipwrecks. Juan, from the sea again, is clothed as a woman by a eunuch (with the smell of food in the background) at the command of a beautiful woman who summons him to her. Torquil dives into the sea following Neuha and emerges safe from history and pursuit in a cave where Neuha gives him food and makes a new fire, but they remain naked. Torquil is not ceremonially clothed like his predecessors because he permanently joins Neuha's unnoticed nudity. Juan, on the other hand, is carefully dressed by Haidee. And Haidee herself is ostentatiously dressed when we meet her. She cheers Juan both

With food and raiment, and those soft attentions,
Which are (as I must own) of female Growth ... (II, 123)

"Clothes" are initially part of Haidee's "soft attentions" (a Popeian phrase). Juan has "A bed of furs, and a pelisse, / For Haidee stripped her sables off to make / His couch" (II, 133). Zoe and Haidee also gave "a petticoat apiece" to keep him warm. It makes a little sequence. First, Juan wears virtually Haidee's own clothes. Then he is ceremonially dressed by her and his own "scarce decent trousers" are deliberately burnt:

And in the fire his recent rags they scatter'd,
And dress'd him, for the present, like a Turk,
Or Greek – that is, although it not much matter'd,
Omitting turban, slippers, pistols, dirk –
They furnish'd him, entire except some stitches,
With a clean shirt, and very spacious breeches. (II, 160)

When Byron says "although it not much mattered", the casualness, as usual, is only apparent. It matters a great deal that Juan is dressed like a Turk, or Greek because the clothes were then undistinguishable, dressed by a woman but not given a turban (male head authority) or pistol and dirk (male phallic authority). Later, at the feast in Canto III, he is allowed a turban, but it is feminised: "His turban furled in many a graceful fold" and, wonderfully clever touch, he has a jewel with Haidee's hair pinned on to it. No dirk is mentioned. Haidee really presides. Later still, when Lambro is recognised, the male presence that Haidee has tamed in Juan is re-asserted. Juan

... caught her [Haidee] falling, and from off the wall
Snatched down his sabre (IV, 37)

Juan, we must suppose, cannot be expected to wear his sabre in bed, but there is a meaningful neatness in this detail. It recurs when Juan, wearing woman's oriental clothes and fresh from the slave market, encounters the would-be dominant Sultana in Canto V. She is wearing a deep purple robe signifying both passion and imperial power and "a poniard decked her girdle", so the emasculated Juan, *en travestie*, and taught by a eunuch to walk with small steps, is faced by a passionate imperial lady with a dagger at her loins. The emblem needs no elucidation. As so often in *Don Juan*, the incident intensifies to an impossible extent what has been implicit in earlier events and forces a change of direction in the poem.

Where did Juan's new clothes come from? There is, we discover, a real Oriental wardrobe in Byron's verse. Baba goes to

A certain press or cupboard niched in yonder ...

... and the black,
I say, unlocking the recess, pulled forth

A quantity of clothes fit for the back
Of any Mussulman, whate'er his worth,
And of variety there was no lack ... (5, 66-7)

Baba has clothes for any occasion in this magic wardrobe. Juan's friend, Johnson, is garbed as a "Turkish dandy" with "a dagger rich and handy". Juan, of course, is offered a suit:

In which a Princess with great pleasure would
Array her limbs; but Juan standing mute,
As not being in a masquerading mood,
Gave it a slight kick with his Christian foot ... (V, 73)

Juan is offered the clothes of a Haidee, princess of her father's land, not inappropriately, because he is something of a princess too. All the distinctions of transgressive dress as disguise, masquerade, and erotic crime are concentrated in Byron's exact comic writing at this point. Juan is said later to be "in his feminine disguise" (VI, 26). Although he now claims to be not "in a masquerading mood", he does accept the costume and makes a joke about marrying the Sultan.

This use of costume, both playful and transgressive, lies at the centre of Byron's customary social, political, sexual, and religious interests. It produces some of his best writing. But we must insist that it is not where Byron ends up or where his verse points to. Transgression – comic or tragic, romantic or burlesque – is Byron's centre, but not his terminus. He never simply endorses transgression, nor does he endorse the relativism and ennui which are the authorisation and consequence of transgression knowingly undertaken.

It is quite wrong, for instance, to read the harem episode as though it is a plucky harbinger of feminism, gay culture, or indeterminacy of gender. It is not as though Byron gives us a Pisgah sight of these things but, retaining the prejudices of his times, cannot take us into the promised antinomian land. In the harem episode, for example, he very neatly outwits transgression by transgression. In one scale of values, inherent in the poem, the worst transgression that Juan can make is to forget Haidee, who is privileged in *Don Juan*, and make love to another woman. Yet the poem, a version of the Don Juan story, can scarcely continue without this happening. In another set of values, also in operation, the worst transgression that Juan can make is to become what his drag outfit suggests – a willing inhabitant of the distorted world of the Seraglio. The eunuch's wardrobe makes Juan and Johnson inhabitants and insiders within Sodom and Gomorrah. The echoes of Beckford's *Vathek* here are real and dangerous.

But Juan, *en travestie*, rather ridiculous as he is, still refuses the role given to him by eunuch and imperial woman. He is then seen as increasingly masculine, ogling the real girls on the way back to the harem and discerned as attractively "other" by harem girls when he gets there. His transgression with Dudù, who is carefully presented as ultra-passive in order to render Juan palpably masculine and invasive by contrast, is a restoration of the nature which even Haidee, however dominant she is, needs to recognise in Juan for him to be a lover at all. Haidee would have been betrayed, we realise, if Juan *had not* made love to Dudù. The logical extension of Haidee's clothing of Juan, initially in her own clothes and then without a dagger, when fully seen (i.e. Juan become Juanna) is a point that Haidee would recoil from. The reader's reaction remains loyal to her at the point where Juan technically is not. That point of recoil, obliquely and wittily rendered, is in Dudù's dream – the bee and the apple – where Juan, dressed and put to bed as a woman in a harem, claims back, so to speak, the dirk that has been denied him. The naughtiest point in the poem expunges its own naughtiness. We're not reading *Vathek*. The two lines of transgression converge and cancel one another out. This movement is characteristically Byronic. Both those who use Byron as a weapon of liberation and those who deride his fluidity and subversion misunderstand his witnessing.

Don Juan does not end here, and the interpretation offered is only true as far as it goes. Juan's

refound and independent dirk will become the weapon used so wantonly in the siege which follows. This, in turn, will be seen to be presided over by an even more imperious woman – Catherine Great. The poem will end with the other great masquerade costume – FitzFulke as a monk, also *en travestie* – but the playfulness now, though real, is muted and subordinate to the most complex designs of Byron’s contriving.

The larger point remains. Byron always moves beyond the opposites which energise his sequences. Transgression signals its own return upon itself. We could offer as final sign of this the very different costume that Byron used in his last act in Greece, where he symbolised and, for a time, organised, the Greek war of Independence. This costume included an enormous classical helmet that could not possibly be mistaken for a turban. Byron, self-consciously European, is now fighting turbans rather than wearing one. Those unsympathetic to Byron, and there are still many, will find here only vanity and chameleon change. Those who know him better will find Byron’s remarkable openness to experience, tolerance (would he have been so considerate to his Turkish prisoners if he had not once dressed as a Turk?) but also they will find Byron’s understanding of the importance of symbols, signs, public and secret connections. Byron paid attention to the practical details, humane management, and public dramatisation of warring politics. The obvious contrast with Shelley here is wholly to Byron’s advantage. Byron is always “changeable but somehow ‘*idem semper*’” as he says in the last stanzas of *Don Juan*. He is like, but not the same as, Baba, with his Oriental wardrobe for all-comers. Like Baba, Byron kits out his characters in regulation and transgressive outfits. Unlike Baba, he is interested in deeper kinds of transgression than simply being found out. He is interested in what dress ultimately signifies. Finally he is interested in finding the limits inherent in our peremptory claim to our own experience or to dissolve the others – for example, of gender or Orientality – which costume so tantalisingly signifies.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL.