



The Shelley-Byron Conversation

William D. Brewer

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"All advanced students of English Romanticism would find this book of use. . . . From the first, Brewer recognizes that the conversation between Shelley and Byron is, in the deepest sense, stylistic rather than moralistic."--Stuart Curran, University of Pennsylvania

"Lucid, direct, and refreshingly unpretentious in its intellectual approach."--Peter Graham, Virginia Polytechnic Institute

While critics traditionally have seen Shelley and Byron as two irreconcilable opposites, separated by both temperament and philosophy, this study--informed by scholarship of the past eighteen years, since Charles Robinson's landmark study--explores their six-year relationship and argues that it was more collaborative than contentious.

Shelley and Byron first met at Lake Geneva, Switzerland, in 1816, brought together by Claire Clairmont (Mary Shelley's stepsister and the Shelleys' traveling companion). The two poets soon discovered that they shared radical political sympathies and a determination to abandon moral platitudes and religious cant. From the beginning it appears that they inspired each other and those around them. After this encounter Byron began a new phase in his development, Shelley embarked on a major work, and Mary Shelley completed *Frankenstein*.

In 1818, the men came together again in Venice for their most important interaction. In the period of intense creativity that followed, both wrote their masterworks: Shelley composed *Julian and Maddalo* (a poem inspired by their discussions) and began writing *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron completed the first canto of *Don Juan* and all of *Mazeppa*.

By analyzing the echoes and allusions found in their writing, Brewer suggests that Shelley and Byron transformed each other's work. His discussion of *Julian and Maddalo* considers the conversational style each poet came to employ; his analysis of *Cain* shows how it reflects their mutual interest in Prometheanism and their fascination with the Devil; his examination of *The Triumph of Life* includes an appraisal of the influence of Goethe's *Faust* on both.

In general, Brewer says, Shelley and Byron have not been given credit for their willingness to learn from each other. Their personal and literary dialogues ranged from discussions of their social-activist goals to their perceptions of the benighted and tragic state of humanity, shaping some of the most important achievements of the Romantic era.

William D. Brewer is associate professor of English at Appalachian State University. He is the editor of *New Essays on Lord Byron* and the author of articles in *Philological Quarterly*, *The Keats-Shelley Journal*, and other publications.

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