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The Bride of Abydos: The Regime of Visibility and the Possibility of Resistance

Tom Mole

‘All convulsions end with me in rhyme’ Byron wrote to Thomas Moore, ‘and, to solace my midnights, I have scribbled another Turkish story’ (BLJ III, 184). The connection Byron made between *The Bride of Abydos* and his own emotional life has proved compelling, not least because the ‘convulsions’ are so numerous and well documented. After the end of his turbulent affair with Lady Caroline Lamb and her departure for Ireland in September 1812, Byron began an intrigue with Lady Oxford. They met at the Hampden Club in June 1812, and Byron accompanied the Oxfords to Cheltenham in September. He stayed with them at their country home, Eywood, in November and again in December 1812 and March 1813. The Oxfords were planning a trip abroad, however, and Byron accompanied Lady Oxford to Portsmouth on 13 June 1813, from where she sailed with her husband on 28 June, ending the affair. After this Byron became involved with his half-sister Augusta Leigh while pursuing Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster. Augusta socialised with Byron in London in July 1813 and he visited her at the beginning of August. By mid August he was writing to Lady Melbourne that he wanted to take Augusta abroad with him (BLJ III, 87, 93), and telling Thomas Moore that he was in ‘a far more serious, and entirely new, scrape’ (BLJ III, 96). Byron and Augusta were together at Six Mile Bottom in December 1813, and at Newstead Abbey in January 1814. Meanwhile, Byron pursued Lady Frances, under the nose of her imperceptive husband, while visiting the Websters at Aston Hall in September and October 1813 and during their visit to Newstead later that month. He finally ‘spared her’ and the Websters left for a tour of Scotland in November (BLJ III, 146).¹ In the midst of these emotional entanglements, Byron started writing *The Bride of Abydos* at the beginning of November 1813, and published it on 2 December.²

Byron himself, with his habitual knack of tracing his poems back to fascinatingly obscure emotional springs, was the first to identify this series of events as the poem’s primary interpretative context. Before he’d finished the first draft, he wrote to Lady Melbourne, ‘my mind has been from late and later events in such a state of fermentation that as usual I have been obliged to empty it in rhyme – & am in the very heart of another Eastern tale’ (BLJ III, 157). When William Gifford read the poem in manuscript, Byron wrote, quoting Pope:

It was written – I cannot say for amusement nor ‘obliged by hunger and request of friends’ but in a state of mind from circumstances which occasionally occur to ‘us youth’ that rendered it necessary for me to apply my mind to something – any thing but reality – and under this not very brilliant inspiration it was composed.

(BLJ III, 161)

For later readers, that context has been difficult to avoid. It was endorsed by Jerome McGann in his edition of Byron’s *Complete Poetical Works*, when he noted that ‘[t]he impetus that set B[Byron] writing *Bride* was his recollections of his love for Augusta, on the one hand, and of his more recent “platonic” affair with Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster on the other’ (CPW III, 435). Partly as a result of this apparently solid link between amorous tangles and poetic production, *The Bride of Abydos* has been marginal to the modern revaluation of Byron’s tales. Recent criticism, moving away from the tendency to read these poems as camouflaged

autobiography or psychoanalytic symptoms, has viewed them in the context of British imperialism, or as allegories of domestic politics.³ This essay brings insights from these new approaches to bear on *The Bride of Abydos*, alongside theories of gender and the gaze, but rather than linking the tale too forcefully to a single issue or event, I address Byron's abstract political thought, analysing the relation between a macro-politics of social control and a micro-politics of resistance or disruption.

Byron's affair with Lady Oxford was not only an amorous diversion. It was also an important episode in his political education.⁴ Byron described her as 'a woman, who, amid all her fascination, always urged a man to usefulness or glory' (BLJ III, 229). '[S]he always pressed me on senatorial duties, and particularly in the cause of weakness', he recalled (BLJ III, 229). Byron's three speeches in the House of Lords had been full of fiery rhetoric, but had failed to establish his parliamentary career.⁵ By November 1813 he declared himself 'sick of parliamentary mummeries' and, refusing William Baldwin's request that he present a petition, withdrew from parliamentary politics (BLJ III, 206). But he still dedicated *The Bride of Abydos* to his political mentor Lord Holland, in a gesture that was partly a farewell to politics and partly a renewed declaration of his political allegiances. The Hollands and the Oxfords had introduced Byron to a Whig elite that was, in Malcolm Kelsall's words, 'in crisis'.⁶ The Whigs defended a legacy from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that aimed for a balance of power between the Sovereign and the people; they hoped that the Prince Regent would create a Whig government in 1811, but he failed to do so. As a result, the Whigs had to content themselves with marginal gains and quotidian politicking; more substantial reforms were only to appear with the disintegration of the Whigs and the emergence of modern liberalism in the 1820s and 30s.⁷ Byron would play a role in that later shift through his involvement with *The Liberal*, but in 1813 he had lost any illusions about being instrumental in rapid, prompt and far-reaching political change in Britain. For this reason, we should pay attention not only to *The Bride of Abydos*'s depiction of revolutionary *kairos*, but also to its concern with satisfactory ways of "making do" in political *chronos*.

The gaze, as both a pathway of desire and a vector of coercion, is an important vehicle for the poem's analysis of the circulation of power and the possibilities of resistance. In *The Bride of Abydos*, looking can arouse desires and produce pleasures. Selim and Zuleika, the cousins whose love is thwarted by Zuleika's murderous father Giaffir, gaze longingly at one another. Their love thrives on exchanging furtive glances or gazing into each other's eyes. While Selim 'gazed [...] through the lattice grate' (1. 255), 'to him Zuleika's eye was turned' (1. 257). Looking for him to reciprocate her gaze and confirm their mutual devotion, she 'watch'd his eye', but 'it still was fixed' (1. 268). When Selim comes out of his reverie, 'the soul of that eye' flashes 'through the long lashes round it' and their gazes can finally meet (1. 338-39). The lovers' eyes express their attachment and their unblinking constancy. Zuleika pledges to 'do all but close thy dying eye', as though not even death could break their mutual gaze (1. 404). Their love affair is a lattice of interlocking glances, looking to meet and be reciprocated.

But looking more often arouses resentment and produces dangers. Leander is invoked at the start of Canto 2 because his gaze is dangerously preoccupied:

He could not see, he would not hear,
Or sound or sign foreboding fear;
His eye but saw that light of love,
The only star it hail'd above[.]

(2. 12-15)

Dazzled by Hero's light at the centre of his infatuated tunnel vision, Leander swam to a watery death that Selim's death echoes. Wading in the shallows, Selim is shot down by Giaffir's fatally accurate eye when he looks back for Zuleika:

Ah! Wherefore did he turn to look
For her his eye but sought in vain?

That pause, that fatal gaze he took,
Hath doom'd his death, or fix'd his chain.

(2. 563-66)

A misplaced gaze in this poem can be fatal, laying Selim open to the all too effective gaze that Giaffir directs down the sights of his musket, closing Selim's eyes for ever. Meanwhile, in a telling metonym, Zuleika's eye 'was closed – / Yea – closed before his own!' (2. 619-20). *The Bride of Abydos*, then, is concerned with the dangers of looking and the risks of being looked at.

A politics of the gaze is systemic in Giaffir's regime, and deeply inscribed in Islamic society as the poem represents it. Zuleika affirms that 'To meet the gaze of strangers' eyes / Our law, our creed, our God denies' (1. 429-30). Giaffir paranoiacally controls who can look at whom, and who is watched by whom, in an effort to secure his power. He has 'Slaves, tools, accomplices – no friends' (2. 332), living in a totalitarian society of universal mistrust, beset by deception, power struggles and fear. This regime uses gender identities as a mechanism of social control. The harem is, in the poem's Orientalist imagination, an important way of structuring looking to reify gender in support of power.⁸ Neither quite a prison nor quite a refuge, the harem keeps women away from prying eyes while preventing them from looking out and returning the gaze of a seducer. The 'massy doors' (1. 240) of its architecture are reinforced by the surveillance of the guards 'who watch the women's tower' (1. 80). More than an architectural structure, the harem is a power structure based on the regulation of the gaze: a blind spot which renders women literally and figuratively invisible, and a Foucauldian institution materialising the power of the tyrant who can call them into his sight at any moment.⁹ Because the Moors so carefully oversee them, the women can be overlooked in all matters of social importance. 'All that thy sex hath need to know' Giaffir tells Zuleika, is 'thy father's will' (1. 216, 215). The veil extends the harem's jurisdiction beyond its walls, structuring looking without the corresponding physical structure. Women who cannot be seen clearly and cannot freely look are denied agency by the surveillance of others.¹⁰ The women of the harem are subject to a Foucauldian panopticism, which enforces discipline by submitting its subjects to a constant and inescapable surveillance.¹¹ No transgression passes unobserved. The gaze of power in this disciplinary technology coerces the subjects' bodies into docility, quashing insurgence. Giaffir's command of his womenfolk is maintained, as in the panopticon, by dictating the terms of concealment and visibility. The women are carefully watched by their guards in order to make sure they are not watched by anyone else. 'Woe to the head whose eye beheld / My child Zuleika's face unveil'd!' (1. 38-39).

Comparable practices of coercion operate on men in the poem. When describing the constraints Giaffir places on Selim, Byron elaborates an understanding of gender identity as performative and culturally circumscribed. Arguing for an understanding of gender as performative, Judith Butler asserts:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.¹²

Although Butler intends her theory to open new possibilities for political praxis, she is careful to include a qualified and sophisticated account of the nature of political agency, to which I will return.¹³ Since gender is a 'strategy of survival within compulsory systems' which 'regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right', she insists on 'the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs.'¹⁴ Performativity therefore describes the manner in which subjects are compelled to stabilise a gender identity, but also the manner in which gender may be subverted, queered or troubled. This dual aspect

of gender performativity provides a useful way to understand Selim's shifting masculinity and his relation to Giaffir's robustly patriarchal regime.

Whilst subjects in the poem shore up a gender identity by repeatedly performing certain gender-specific actions before an audience, their performances are not free choices. In Giaffir's regime the body and its performances signify all personal worth for men. The attributes of the manly body, such as strength, martial skill and horsemanship, must be proved by display in battle or competition. For this purpose, Giaffir maintains an elaborate system of spectacular military exercises.¹⁵ He leaves his couch to 'witness many an active deed / With sabre keen, or blunt jerreed' (l. 237-38). With his 'Maugrabee' (mercenaries) and 'Delis' (cavalrymen), Giaffir performs martial arts (l. 235-36). The 'javelin-darting crowd' display their prowess by 'cleav[ing] the folded felt / With sabre stroke right sharply dealt' (l. 248-50). These displays add up to a performance of masculinity, or what Butler would call 'a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of a body'.¹⁶ What isn't demonstrated as masculine must be feminine, femininity being conceived as non-male and therefore of extremely limited worth. Giaffir proscribes Selim from the theatre of 'mimic war', the arena where masculine roles are played out, and so underwrites his powerful inscription of Selim's body as feminine (l. 450). So while the body becomes the locus for performing gender identity, it is also subject to the coercive pressure of others gazes. Giaffir says to Selim, 'I mark thee – and I know thee too' (l. 120). Marking Selim cuts two ways: Giaffir keeps him under surveillance, scrutinising him for signs of rebellion, and tries to coerce the rebellion out of him, marking him down as effeminate, weak and worthless, as if with a label or a brand.

'Vain were a father's hope to see / Aught that beseems a man in thee' taunts Giaffir (l. 83-84). But Giaffir's look, which claims to discover Selim's effeminacy, in fact coercively constructs it from a polemical reading of Selim's bodily performance. Giaffir's powerful gaze splinters Selim's body into a substandard assemblage of arms, eyes and hands, and reads these shards as effeminate. Having excluded Selim from 'the game of mimic slaughter' that Giaffir plays with his henchmen (l. 247), he taunts him with claims that he would rather lounge about in the garden 'when thine arm should bend the bow, / And hurl the dart, and curb the steed' (l. 85-88). Selim's resentment at being excluded from these performances of masculinity boils over in Canto Two, where he complains that:

Giaffir's fear
Denied the courser and the spear –
Though oft – Oh, Mahomet! how oft! –
In full Divan the despot scoff'd,
As if *my* weak unwilling hand
Refused the bridle or the brand[.]

(2. 323-28)

Reading Selim's body for signs of masculinity, Giaffir surveys Selim's arm and finds it wanting: 'his arm is little worth' (l. 135). His eyes likewise fail to meet Giaffir's standards of masculinity:

Would that yon orb, whose matin glow
Thy listless eyes so much admire,
Would lend thee something of his fire!

(1. 90-92)

Giaffir identifies Selim's body as boyish, claiming that he would only fear him if 'thy beard had manlier length' (l. 122), and he reads femininity in his hands, taunting, 'Go – let thy less than woman's hand / Assume the distaff – not the brand' (l. 99-100). Listing the failings of Selim's 'listless' body, Giaffir enforces a standard of masculinity based on his claim that the body is inscribed with signs of the individual's gendered value. These elements apply to both women and men in the poem, and once again, the harem institutionalises a coercive gaze.

The harem can only be penetrated at the cost of castration, whether literal for the eunuchs who traditionally attend on the women, or figural for Selim, who is emasculated by his association with the harem.¹⁷ The fact that Selim has the harem's (phallic) 'grating key' mocks his supposed lack of virility, as he passes in and out of the harem without appearing as a sexual threat to its women (1. 67). Giaffir's gaze constructs Selim's effeminacy whilst it controls Zuleika's looks.

At the tale's pivotal moment, we are invited to look at Selim's body in a new way. Byron presents Selim's new performance of masculinity to the reader's gaze in twenty descriptive lines (2. 131-50).¹⁸ He is now adorned not in the luxurious vestments that become a pacha's son, but in the simple clothes of a sailor. His ornamental dagger is replaced by a brace of pistols and a sabre which is for use and not for show, and he's armoured with a cuirass and greaves. 'High command' now '[speaks] in his eye, and tone, and hand,' where before Giaffir read effeminacy and worthlessness (2. 147-48). When Selim reveals his alter ego, he transforms his body in the reader's eyes from a docile site of coercion to an eloquent site of resistance. Where Giaffir previously read his eyes and hands, they now speak for themselves, as Selim performs his gender differently. Selim's body, now actively signifying, performs for Zuleika's eyes the masculine identity that it was thought to lack when Giaffir's gaze rendered it docile.

Selim invests his transformation with great importance, claiming that the truth of his identity is now obvious to see. 'I said I was not what I seem'd; / And now thou see'st my words were true' (2. 151-52). But his costume change, I contend, falls short of the kind of disruptive practice that Butler envisages precisely because it overestimates the agency available to Selim. Instead, it is part of a contained practise of resistance, a simulacrum of subversion that fails as soon as it becomes an open revolt. Giaffir's regime includes a number of safety valves, which allow it to continue operating by providing a tolerable outlet for his subjects' discontent. They are circumscribed spaces in which a temporary respite from the regime is available, but only within confines that prevent it becoming a threat. The first of these spaces is the cypress groves where Selim and Zuleika go early in the morning. Selim describes how, once they got there, the cousins seemed to have escaped the regime's surveillance, and felt such intense freedom that the whole world seemed to be theirs:

Before the guardian slaves awoke
We to the cypress groves had flown,
And made earth, main, and heaven our own!

(1. 68-70)

But this sense of freedom was fleeting, and when he 'heard the deep tambour' signal the start of Giaffir's divan, Selim returned to the court (1. 73). Once there, he reveals that the cypress groves are not in fact the liberated space that they at first appear, but are secured and kept under surveillance: 'none can pierce that secret bower / But those who watch the women's tower' (1. 79-80). Giaffir warns Haroun that Zuleika must not be allowed this indulgence too often, but he is prepared to tolerate it (1. 101-04).

Such contained opportunities to experience a modicum of freedom are a recurrent feature of the poem, but they are easy to overlook and uncomfortable to recognize. Selim's most impassioned hymn to freedom, and one of Byron's most lyrical treatments of liberty, in fact describes this kind of contained experience:

'Tis vain – my tongue can not impart
My almost drunkenness of heart,
When first this liberated eye
Survey'd Earth, Ocean, Sun, and Sky,
As if my spirit pierced them through,
And all their inmost wonders knew!
One word alone can paint to thee
That more than feeling – I was Free!

(1. 343-50)

The stirring sentiments of that quotable passage can lead us to overlook the fact – as Selim himself is keen to overlook it – that he describes a moment of freedom that is contained within the dominant order and barely ruffles its operations. Selim’s excursion takes place when he has been left under the guard of Haroun while Giaffir pursues a military campaign (2. 329-36). Having served Selim’s father, and seen him murdered by Giaffir, Haroun knows Selim’s secret history and is sympathetic to his plight (2. 276-302). He reluctantly allows Selim a strictly limited amount of liberty:

His captive, though with dread resigning,
My thralldom for a season broke,
On promise to return before
The day when Giaffir’s charge was o’er.

(2. 339-42)

Selim enthuses about his experience, but he nonetheless submits once again to Giaffir’s regime of visibility. These examples of safety valves in Giaffir’s scopocracy suggest the extent to which the regime remains viable precisely through giving its subjects the carefully circumscribed and contained experience of liberty, or liberty’s simulacrum.

The pirate cave, ‘a grotto, hewn / By nature but enlarged by art’, where Selim and Zuleika retreat, is another space in which the experience of temporary liberation can be contained by the dominant culture. Byron makes it clear that Selim and Zuleika have both been to the cave before, although apparently not together. It’s an everyday resource which enables them to obtain a brief respite from Giaffir’s society. Zuleika visits the cave to play her lute and read the Koran (2. 101-02) and Selim to meet with the band of pirates that he secretly leads (2. 382-83). Within the cave’s confines, concealed from prying eyes, Zuleika and Selim gain a breathing space away from their usual constraints. They both use the opportunity to perform gendered actions that are normally denied them. Selim becomes a manly pirate and breaks the Muslim prohibition on wine (2. 127-8, 317-20) and Zuleika, looking up from her Koran, indulges in a heterodox speculation about the nature of heaven for women:

And oft in youthful reverie
She dream’d what Paradise might be:
Where woman’s parted soul shall go
Her Prophet had disdain’d to show[.]

(2. 104-07)

The cave is a paradoxically liberating confinement, one they are happy to take to in place of the confinements of wider society.¹⁹ When Selim persuades Zuleika to meet him at night, he does not at first propose that they should elope. Instead he offers her this kind of limited liberation, within the circumscribed space of a walled garden:

Then softly from the Haram creep
Where we may wander by the deep:
Our garden battlements are steep;
Nor these will rash intruder climb
To list our words, or stint our time[.]

(1. 465-69)

Selim promises not an escape from Giaffir’s structures of control, but a chance to avoid them temporarily. The garden battlements will keep intruders out, and Selim and Zuleika in.

Zuleika’s impending marriage is the crisis which forces them to try turning their everyday tactics for living within Giaffir’s regime into a revolutionary upheaval that will permanently overthrow it. When ‘No more remains to win, and much to fear’, Selim and Zuleika

understand that they have become swept into revolutionary *kairos*: ‘This hour bestows, or ever bars escape’ (2. 445, 463). However, the experience of being allowed a modicum of freedom, or the simulacrum of freedom, within a space or time that can be circumscribed and contained by the dominant order, is not a preparation for revolt but an inoculation against it. Only a very limited audience – Zuleika and the pirates – sees Selim’s transformation, and although it seems to be a threat to Giaffir, it may only be dressing up for a specific circle of friends. Selim ‘ask[s] no land beyond my sabre’s length’ (2. 433). In fact, he fantasises a free future that appears as a whole series of tight corners. He will be ‘girt by my band’ (2. 412), but claims that, ‘My tent on shore, my galley on the sea, / Are more than cities and Serais to me’ (2. 390-91). Selim wants to trade the walled-in spaces of city and caravanserai for the equally restrictive tent and boat. What works for Selim in the confines of cave, tent, boat, or pirate band won’t work for the rest of those subjected to Giaffir’s regime. The freedom that comes from confining oneself away from the gaze of power is shown to be freedom only within those confines, leaving the pirates in their cave to ponder victories to which Selim cannot lead them:

The last of Lambro’s patriots there
 Anticipated freedom share;
 And oft around the cavern fire
 On visionary schemes debate,
 To snatch the Rayahs from their fate.
 So let them ease their hearts with prate
 Of equal rights, which man ne’er knew;
 I have a love for freedom too.

(2. 380-87)

The pirates see themselves as descendants of the Greek revolutionary Lambro Canzani (whom Byron mentions in a note to this passage), and imagine themselves liberating the Rayahs (those who pay the capitation tax, according to the note). But while Selim professes his love for this ideal, he dismisses the possibility of equality as only ‘prate’: the pirates, with their ‘visionary schemes’, may ‘ease their hearts’ but will never help the mass of their countrymen. The cave is a space that facilitates a fantasy of freedom, while ensuring a continuing reality of subjection.

Although Selim and Zuleika find temporary freedom in their liberating confinement, Byron warns that their response risks solipsism and produces a damagingly autistic autarky. The subjectivity that it consolidates makes sense only in its own terms, and cannot relate to the wider world. The fantasies of the cave cannot be realised in revolt. The cave temporarily provides both strategic cover (protecting against bullets) and existential safety (protecting against unwelcome gazes), but Selim doesn’t survive for long once he leaves its confines. He looks back at Zuleika, hoping for a reciprocal glance that will confirm him in his alternative identity, but ‘that fatal gaze he took, / Hath doom’d his death, or fix’d his chain’ (2. 565-66). Selim cannot always choose his spectators. He wants Zuleika for an audience, but when he leaves the cave he re-enters Giaffir’s scopocracy, and gets cut down by the tyrant’s gaze, which is ‘too nearly, deadly aim’d to err’ (2. 575). Retreating to the cave, playing at pirates and discussing ‘visionary schemes’ are shown to be simulacra of resistance that can be tolerated by the dominant order, so long as they stay within manageable confines. When they burst out of those confines, they are easily suppressed with overwhelming force.

But although he skewered the simulacrum of subversion, it does not follow that Byron was reconciled to a programme of political quietism in 1813. Whilst he was more cynical than he had been in, for example, ‘Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill’, or ‘Lines to a Lady Weeping’ about attempts decisively to destabilise or renounce the dominant order, his political concerns were far from nugatory. Rather, his political interest had shifted towards those everyday practices of resistance that might enable subjects to live more satisfactorily in unsatisfactory political circumstances. Michel de Certeau refers to these practices as ‘the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or

individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline.”²⁰ While most moments of potential subversion in *The Bride of Abydos* remain contained, Byron also makes clear that there are fissures of resistance within Giaffir’s regime. Selim’s claim that he could provide the spark to a tinder-box of revolution may be wishful thinking, but it still identifies pockets of discontent:

Within thy father’s house are foes;
Not all who break his bread are true:
To these should I my birth disclose,
His days, his very hours were few:
They only want a heart to lead,
A hand to point them to the deed.

(1. 270-75)

Selim’s error is to imagine that, once he’s reclaimed his ‘true’ masculinity, he will enjoy boundless political agency. Against that misplaced confidence, I would set Butler’s understanding of agency for the gendered subject:

There is no self that is prior to [gender] or who maintains ‘integrity’ prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there.²¹

Gender cannot be renounced wholesale, but only disrupted, its protocols queered, its possibilities expanded. In Byron’s tale, effective resistance to Giaffir cannot renounce the regime’s structures of looking or constructions of gender, but only disrupt them.

One of the tale’s most interesting moments of resistance concerns the politics of the gaze and suggests that a satisfactory practice of resistance can occur without overthrowing the dominant order, but by using the same tools with which it oppresses. *The Bride of Abydos* hints that, while structures of visibility can be technologies of coercion, the gaze can also become a weapon of resistance. When Giaffir taunts Selim with being the son of a slave (unaware that Selim knows himself to be the son of the pacha whom Giaffir murdered and supplanted), Selim inwardly boils with fury:

Thus held his thoughts their dark career;
And glances ev’n of more than ire
Flash forth, then faintly disappear.
Old Giaffir gazed upon his son
And started; for within his eye
He read how much his wrath had done;
He saw rebellion there begun[.]

(1. 112-18)

Selim looks rebelliously back at Giaffir, reflecting his wrath back at him. Looking, which is usually pressed into the service of Giaffir’s regime, is here mobilised against it. The moment of resistance ‘flash[es] forth’ only to ‘faintly disappear’: its effect is temporary but real. This is a kind of resistance made possible not by escaping from the network of surveillance in which subjects find themselves caught, but by employing an element of the apparatus against itself in order to produce a space of comparative liberty *within* it. Selim’s most effective, albeit temporary, tactic of resistance involves creatively deploying the same resource that Giaffir uses to dominate. Selim’s subversive looking makes Giaffir start, and he redoubles his own surveillance, resolving to ‘watch him closer than before’ (1. 143).

Looking is the form through which Giaffir’s tyranny maintains its control, but it’s not his prerogative alone; vision does not belong exclusively to the dominant order. In Foucault’s words, ‘[i]t’s a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised.’²² Because looking belongs to no one and serves no one

in particular, it can be appropriated, at least temporarily, by the oppressed Selim and mobilised against the despot Giaffir. For instance while Giaffir boasts that ‘I mark thee – and I know thee too’ (l. 120), Selim takes up the tools where they lie and turns them on their master:

As sneeringly these accents fell,
On Selim’s eye he fiercely gazed:
That eye return’d him glance for glance,
And proudly to his sire’s was raised,
Till Giaffir’s quail’d and shrunk askance –
And why – he felt, but durst not tell.

(l. 126-31)

Selim outstares Giaffir, the steadiness of his gaze revealing his strength, pride and rectitude. Giaffir, usually the tyrant of looking, can’t bear Selim’s gaze, and shrinks. For Selim and Zukeika looking, like loving, is a kind of power or a kind of freedom available to those who are denied more tangible liberties. Selim’s eye, which had previously been marked down as ‘listless’ and feminine, resists Giaffir’s coercive reading of his body. While he is denied the chance to break Giaffir’s lance, either in open battle or in military exercises, Selim can still break his gaze. He ‘return[s] him glance for glance’ and temporarily disrupts Giaffir’s regime. The individual eye that observes Giaffir’s tyranny and recognises its callousness is a silent accusation, bearing witness to oppression. When Selim dies, he has stopped looking, for a moment, in this resistant way, turning not full into Giaffir’s face, but back to Zuleika. That backward glance is directed towards the cave, retreat, confinement, solipsism and ineffectuality, and it costs Selim his life.

Although such a practice of resistance takes place within the governing system, it is not so easily contained by it, as Giaffir’s uneasiness suggests. Byron’s early and late interest in and contribution to revolutionary movements has tended to skew discussion of his politics away from moments of resistance such as this one and towards an unfruitful debate over the efficacy of his revolutionary engagements with the Luddites, the Carbonari or the Suliotés. We should not overlook his concern, in the middle of his poetic career, with more dispersed tactics of political resistance. In *The Bride of Abydos*, Byron is concerned both with the ways in which attempts at liberation can be contained and defused and with the effective practice of resistance in everyday life: with an activist looking-back that outstares the gaze of power but allows only a momentary gain.

¹ For these events, see Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1957), I, 362-433 *passim*.

² For details of the poem’s composition and extant manuscripts and proofs, see CPW II, 431-34.

³ For a psychoanalytic reading, see Peter Manning, *Byron and his Fictions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978). For political contexts, see Daniel P. Watkins, *Social Relations in Byron’s Eastern Tales* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987). More recent, political readings begin with Edward Said, who mentions Byron a number of times in *Orientalism*, but without exception as part of a list of (two or more) writers. The only poem he mentions by name is *The Giaour*. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 22, 31, 99, 101, 118, 167, 192. See also Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 13-67, Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Marilyn Butler, ‘The Orientalism of Byron’s *Giaour*,’ in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. by Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp. 78-96, and Caroline Franklin, ‘“Some Samples of the Finest Orientalism”: Byronic Philhellenism and Proto-Zionism at the Time of the Congress of Vienna,’ in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire*, ed. by Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 221-42.

⁴ The pioneering study of Byron’s politics was D. N. Raymond, *The Political Career of Lord Byron* (New York: Henry Holt, 1924). For a more sceptical view, see Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron’s Politics* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987). Neither of these books, however, discusses Byron’s tales at length.

Jonathan Gross identifies a new source for *The Bride of Abydos*, in the context of an exploration of Byron's liberalism. Jonathan David Gross, *Byron: The Erotic Liberal* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) esp. pp. 55-78.

⁵ For the text of the speeches, see *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 20-45.

⁶ Kelsall, *Byron's Politics*, p. 2.

⁷ In addition to Kelsall, see David Erdman, 'Lord Byron and the Genteel Reformers,' *PMLA*, 56 (1941), 1065-94; Lord Blake, 'The Politics of Byron's Time,' *The Byron Journal*, 17 (1989), 40-49; L. G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party, 1782-1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Michael Roberts, *The Whig Party 1807-1812* (London: Macmillan, 1939, repr. F. Cass, 1965).

⁸ For an examination of the harem in Byron's writing, see Malcolm Kelsall, 'Byron and the Women of the Harem,' in *Rereading Byron: Essays Selected from Hofstra University's Byron Bicentennial Conference*, ed. by Alice Levine and Robert N. Keane (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 165-73.

⁹ It should go without saying that this is a misrepresentation of the harem's place in Islamic culture. Leslie P. Peirce describes it as "a space to which general access is forbidden or controlled and in which the presence of certain individuals or certain modes of behaviour are forbidden. [...] The word *harem* is a term of respect, redolent of religious purity and honour, and evocative of the requisite obeisance." Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 4-5. Joseph Lew argues that "Western empires, in reducing or fetishizing 'harem' as merely a collection of female bodies, facilitated the symbolic representation of [...] empire building. What endangered polities [...] might experience as dismemberment could [thus] be seen, through Western eyes, as 'liberation'". Joseph Lew, 'The Necessary Orientalist? *The Giaour* and Nineteenth-Century Imperialist Misogyny,' in *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture*, ed. by Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 173-202 (p. 192).

¹⁰ Jerome Christensen connects the veil, agency, and the performance or imposition of gender in his comment that "In *The Bride* the distinction between men and women hinges precisely on the ability to disguise oneself versus the necessity that one be veiled." Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 116.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), esp. pp. 195-230.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 179.

¹³ Butler's sense of the subject's agency has often been overstated. In her more recent work, she notes: "The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction one puts on, as one puts clothes on in the morning." Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 94. Ten years after *Gender Trouble's* first publication, Butler acknowledged "Much of my work in recent years has been devoted to clarifying and revising the theory of performativity" (*Gender Trouble*, xiv).

¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 177-78.

¹⁵ This aspect of the poem would have had particular resonance in Romantic Britain. The armed forces were expanding rapidly in response to the Napoleonic threat, and very large numbers of volunteer militia, distinguished by their fine uniforms, drilled regularly around the country. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 297-337. Tim Fulford argues that the period witnessed a protracted rethinking of the values of chivalric masculinity eulogised by Burke. Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics and Poetics in the writings of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). John Tosh provides an overview of research in this area. John Tosh, 'The Old Adam and the New Man: Emerging Themes in the History of English Masculinities, 1750-1850' in *English Masculinities 1660-1800*, ed. by Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 217-38.

¹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

¹⁷ In fact the poem does not specifically mention eunuchs, although the Nubian Haroun does not seem to be considered a potential seducer, possibly because of his age or his dark skin.

¹⁸ On Byron's use of classical sources in this transformation, and the transformation that follows Selim's death, see Robert B. Ogle, 'The Metamorphosis of Selim: Ovidian Myth in *The Bride of Abydos II*,' *Studies in Romanticism*, 20, no. 1 (1981), 21-31.

¹⁹ For a broader discussion of comparable themes, see Victor Brombert, 'The Happy Prison: A Recurring Romantic Metaphor' in *Romanticism: Vistas, Instances, Continuities*, ed. by David Thorburn and Geoffrey Hartman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 62-79.

²⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv-xv.

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

²² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 156.