

San Jose State University
SJSU ScholarWorks

Faculty Publications

English and Comparative Literature


1-1-2004

Isaac Nathan and Lady Caroline Lamb: A Response to Graham Pont

Paul Douglass

San Jose State University, paul.douglass@sjsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/eng_complit_pub

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paul Douglass. "Isaac Nathan and Lady Caroline Lamb: A Response to Graham Pont" *Newstead Abbey Byron Society Review* (2004): 88-89.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English and Comparative Literature at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

ISAAC NATHAN AND LADY CAROLINE LAMB
"A Byronic Romance in Music and Verse"

A response to the article on pages 86-100 of the 2003 Review

Paul Douglass

As someone interested in Isaac Nathan and his relationships with Byron and Lady Caroline Lamb, I was intrigued by Graham Pont's recent article in the *Newstead Byron Society Review* for January 2003, "A Byronic Romance." Lady Caroline and Nathan had a relationship that has gone unappreciated, but there are serious problems with the evidence Mr. Pont presents from the poetry published in *The British Stage*, a magazine that Pont believes Nathan edited from October 1819 to January 1821. There may be direct proof of Nathan's editorial activities and of his contributions to this and other magazines, like the *Literary Magnet*, and the *Theatrical Inquisitor*, but Pont hasn't made us privy to it here. Similarly, lack of hard evidence plagues the case he builds for the relationship between Nathan and Lady Caroline.

Readers of the *NBSR* will recall that the first proof Pont offers of an affair of the heart between Nathan and LCL is the publication of a poem in *The British Stage* signed "Sappho," which Pont believes to have come from LCL's pen, and which he dates confidently to the period of her visit to Paris in 1815: "the attribution is confirmed by reference to the author's ambience of power, splendour and wealth—which greatly narrows the range of possibilities," he writes (p. 86n). Pont notes that Byron once stole Pope's epithet, "furious Sappho," to describe LCL. He also argues that the epigram on Peter Isaac printed in *The British Stage* immediately after this Sapphic poem is "pure Byron," speculating that it came from Lady Caroline's personal collection of Byron letters, now lost.

However, the poem signed "Sappho" is not the work of Lady Caroline, but rather of Mary ("Perdita") Robinson (1758-1800), the former actress and lover of the young Prince of Wales. The poem has been slightly altered, but it is easily recognizable as "Stanzas Written Between Dover and Calais, July 20, 1792," containing the lines "Proud has been my fatal passion! / Proud my injured heart shall be!" Robinson was an accomplished writer who during the 1790s received the epithet "the English Sappho" for her ability to publish in many genres. The phrase "fatal passion" was attractive to numerous later writers, including Leigh Hunt and Lord Byron, who used it in *The Story of Rimini* (Canto III) and *Sardanapalus* (Act IV), respectively.

Once we know that "Sappho" is not Lady Caroline Lamb, Mr. Pont's other assertions crumble. On what basis would we think the verse on Peter Isaac came from LCL's private collection? Mr. Pont has fallen prey to the seductive possibility of an elusive, tantalizing connection between two people whose lives are often (in his own words) "poorly documented" (p. 90). This has led him to make assumptions about the authorship of the poems he quotes that are not only unsupported but demonstrably incorrect. The vast majority of the verse that he cites as the probable work of Nathan under the pseudonym of "Thomas" is actually by Nathaniel Thomas Haynes Bayly (1797-1839).

Bayly's poetry, when it is remembered at all, has been subject over the years to a certain amount of ridicule. His claim to fame lies in his having composed the line "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." He also wrote the lyrics later set to the popular melody "Long, Long Ago." He wrote over thirty plays, most apparently unremarkable. But, unlike Nathan, Bayly has a proven record of involvement in the magazines Pont has consulted here. Bayly is the author of three poems Pont attributes to Nathan: "Night Thoughts," mentioned on p. 89, "Such Things Were," quoted as likely the work of Nathan on p. 94, and "The Life of My Music Is Gone," quoted as possibly the work of Nathan on p. 89 (with the lines beginning "Be silent for ever! Be silent, my lute!").

In the face of this evidence, one must abandon the argument that those poems formed some sort of dialogue in verse between Nathan and Lady Caroline, in which he portrays her as a "feather in my cap" (p. 89). This latter line is Bayly's, for he is the author of "To Rosa." Bayly also wrote "To Ellen," which Mr. Pont surmised was written by Nathan, alluding to "happier times, to the period between mid-1814 and the early months of 1816 when Nathan was collaborating with Byron" (89-90).

Thomas Bayly also wrote "Farewell," which contains the lines "But you have decreed it—you wish for the gale," quoted on p. 90 of Mr. Pont's article. Bayly, too, wrote "A Poet's Licence," quoted on p. 90 ("Though love at times has power to vex [. . .]"). Bayly is also the author of the lines quoted by Pont on page 92 as probably the work of Nathan: "How blest with you it might have been [. . .]." Bayly it was who also wrote "When Absent from Anne," quoted on p. 92, with the lines beginning "Love has thrown / A spell o'er all she did [. . .]." I direct the reader's attention to Bayly's *Parliamentary Letters* (1818), *Rough Sketches of Bath and Other Poems* (1820), *Outlines of Edinburgh* (1822), and *Songs, Ballads, and Other Poems* (1844).

The lines written (supposedly) by a female writer under the pseudonym of "Sappho Jun." are almost certainly not by Lady Caroline. It is possible that they are by Mary Robinson's daughter (thus "Sappho Jun[ior]"). Regardless, the whole context that would have argued for their attribution to Lady Caroline has now evaporated. The case for a liaison between Nathan and Lady Caroline, built from coincidences and chance allusions in anonymous writing, also practically disappears.

Did Nathan have anything to do with editing *The British Magazine*? We don't know. Did Nathan write a bad review of his own performance in order to reprint his own *riposte*? That is interesting but (so far) unsubstantiated speculation. Is "Sappho Jun." one or several people, and does "she" have anything to do with "Sappho"? Again, we can't tell. Has Mr. Pont really found two previously unattributed poems of Byron's ("Peter Isaac" and "Forget me not!")? Such a discovery would be welcome, but celebration is premature.

Undoubtedly there was a special relationship between Isaac Nathan and Lady Caroline Lamb. I would welcome any definite evidence to substantiate its character. Unfortunately, Mr. Pont's essay doesn't provide a factual basis for such speculation.

Reply to Paul Douglass

Graham Pont

Some years ago I surprised Paul Douglass with my conjecture that Caroline Lamb had been on very intimate terms with Isaac Nathan. I still subscribe to that theory, though I now doubt they were ever *in flagrante delicto*. In 'A Byronic Romance' (*NBSR*, January 2003), I presented a hypothetical reconstruction of the relationship based partly on a series of poetic exchanges published in *The British Stage*, which I believe Nathan edited from October 1819 to December 1821. Paul Douglass has now revealed that many of the poems signed 'Thomas' were not, as I had assumed, written by Isaac Nathan but by another London musician and versifier Thomas Haynes Bayly (1797-1839). This discovery obviously necessitates a substantial revision of my hypothesis but not its complete abandonment; and, while questioning some of Professor Douglass's other conclusions, I am certainly grateful for having been saved from repeating this erroneous ascription in my biography of Nathan.

Douglass also draws attention to something else I wasn't aware of: the close resemblances between the poem entitled, 'To -' ("Original Poetry", *British Stage*, December 1817, p.296) and the 'Stanzas Written Between Dover and Calais, July 20, 1792' by Mary ("Perdita") Robinson. 'The poem has been slightly altered', Douglass admits, while confidently asserting it 'is not the work of Lady Caroline Lamb'. More than 'slightly': the alterations include a new title, the omission of four stanzas, the significant rewriting of five lines and a dozen other verbal changes – as well as numerous differences of spelling and punctuation. The first line of Robinson's twelfth stanza, 'Ten long years of anxious sorrow' becomes 'Many months of silent sorrow' – surely indicating a new biographical allusion. The change of historical circumstance is confirmed by the rewriting of Robinson's fourteenth stanza:

When the storms of fortune press'd thee.
I have wept to see thee weep!
When relentless cares distress'd thee,
I have lull'd those cares to sleep!