"A Fever of the Spirit": Byron, Peacock, and 'Don Leon'

By Stephen Wayne Foster

Lord Byron was a famous British poet who died in 1824. He had loved not only women but boys. Long after his death, there appeared a long poem seemingly written by him, 'Don Leon,' with numerous notes attached. It is certain that this was not written by Byron. The question of who wrote it has never been solved, although it is usually ascribed to George Colman the Younger, who died in 1836. The poem appears to have been written in the 1830's, but the notes mention events as late as 1859. If the notes were written by the poet, it is impossible for Colman to have been the author. In 1990 I announced in the Encyclopedia of Homosexuality that the author of 'Don Leon' was probably Thomas Love Peacock (1795-1866), a satirical novelist and poet. Nobody paid attention to me. Colman is still being listed as the author, my theory was that 'Don Leon' was excellent as literature, and must therefore have been written by some fairly noted author, and not by a mediocrity such as Colman. It took a while for me to sift through the various possible candidates. There were many
MEN FROM BYRON'S DAY WERE STILL ALIVE IN 1859.
THE ONLY TALENTED POET AMONG THEM WAS PECOCK.
I NARROWED MY FOCUS ONTO HIM. IN A SATIRICAL
NOVEL PUBLISHED IN 1818, PECOCK INCLUDED AN
EXCELLENT PARODY OF BYRON IN A BRIEF POEM
BEGINNING "THERE IS A FEVER OF THE SPIRIT,"
I FELT THAT ONLY PECOCK WAS QUALIFIED TO
WRITE 'DON LEON'. THE POEM DEALS WITH THE
PEDERASTIC LOVES OF BYRON AND CULMINATES
IN A MAGNIFICENT APOLOGEY FOR PECOCK.
THIS POEM IS OF THE HIGHEST IMPORTANCE AND
THE IDENTITY OF THE POET MUST BE FOUND. WE
HAVE NO DIRECT PROOF THAT PECOCK WAS GAY
(IF ONE MAY USE SUCH AN ANACHRONISTIC TERM).
HE HAD A WELSH WIFE AND THREE DAUGHTERS,
GEORGE MEREDITH WAS HIS SON-IN-LAW. WE
MUST RECALL THAT JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS
HAD A WIFE AND TWO DAUGHTERS, lest we
IMAGINE THAT PECOCK WAS HETEROSEXUAL
ON THE BASIS OF HIS FAMILY LIFE. HE HAD A
LARGE COLLECTION OF BOOKS THAT HE KEPT
HIDDEN AWAY, never showing them to anyone.
WE KNOW THAT HIS FAVORITE BOOK WAS THE
SATAVRION OF PETRONIUS, a VERY PEDAESTRIC
BOOK, which he probably read in Latin as
THE TRANSLATIONS WERE few and CENSORED. HE
HAD A BIAS AGAINST SCOTS, and so did the
AUTHOR OF 'DON LEON', why he wrote it in
This form, as if by Lord Byron, remains to be seen. He could, just as easily have written it as a general denunciation of the sodomy laws without dragging Byron and his boy friends into it. It refers to hangings in the reign of William IV (1830 to 1837). These hangings ceased in 1836, although the death penalty for sodomy nominally remained on the books until 1861. The first edition of 'Don Leon' appeared no later than 1853 but no copy has survived. We can therefore say nothing about it. An unknown person made a botched copy of it around 1860 and sold it to William Dugdale under the pretense of it being an original work by Byron. Dugdale paid well for it and had a fit when a friend of his pointed out that it was a hoax. Spoiling Dugdale's plans for blackmailing Byron's widow, this friend later informed Henry Ashbee that Dugdale never knew the real identity of the author. Peacock died in 1866 and Dugdale published two editions of 'Don Leon' in the same year, an amazing coincidence! Indeed, these editions have survived and include the notes added since 1853. This version has been reprinted from time to time. It was written during those periods when Peacock was not busy
Writing anything else. He wrote one last novel in 1860, a Darwinian fantasy. It has been suggested that Symonds and Edward Carpenter may have visited him in his old age. This is not impossible (they were 25 and 21 years old at the time of his death), but I have no proof of it. Byron's peeing story was first written about in books no later than 1896, but it was not until 1957 that a full discussion was available in biographies written by Leslie Murdock and G. Wilson Knight. Murdock told me in person that he never heard of Peacock, and could therefore not endorse my theory. Knight was the one who messed up every time by claiming Colman as the author, thus throwing everybody off the track, especially those scholars too lazy to do any research of their own. The Colman theory was endorsed by Eulenburg in 'Greek Love' in 1964. Nevertheless, I stick to my guns: there are some notes to 'Don Leon' that suggest an interest in Asia. Peacock was employed by the East India Company, more could be said, but this must suffice as a basis for intensive research by others into this important mystery.