Byron at School

We have suggested that the proportion of men and women who were attracted to their own sex in early nineteenth-century England was not much different from today. But the effect of severe laws and strongly hostile public opinion made it more difficult for homosexuals to meet and give one another support. If sensational punishments advertised the fact that others of their kind at least existed, newspaper rhetoric implied that they were monsters whose rarity matched their enormity. Self-awareness brought pain and fear. For a homosexual or bisexual, the discovery of his (or her) identity was an experience that must often have made adolescence a long agony. To be a sodomite in England was to be a double anomaly, violating both the natural and the national order.

Most such men and women inevitably lived obscure lives. What they thought and felt we will never know. One of the effects of persecution is to destroy knowledge of the persecuted. This is especially true when the unpopular group is invisible, has much to lose by ceasing to be silent, and has no family tradition to preserve records. Only in exceptional cases will it be possible to reconstruct the past. Such a coincidence, nevertheless, did occur in the Romantic period, when fate decreed, by an ironic twist, that the Englishman most in the world’s eyes should be a bisexual.

Byron was of course exceptional in every way, most notably on account of his rank, his beauty, and the talent that won him fame. Only his lameness marred the gifts of fortune. But these advantages made him as sensitive as he
was proud, and his sense of belonging to a despised minority must have rankled cruelly. Nor could he count on his privileges to protect him. In some times and places they would have. In seventeenth-century France, for instance, though homosexuals of the lower and middle class faced the stake, aristocrats, even when their tastes were widely known, were secure from the law and ostracism. Princes, dukes, and generals might be the object of jeering gossip, but they did not risk their lives or status or even their posts; England in the same age, by contrast, had hanged a bishop and beheaded a peer. Byron's forebears had already faced a measure of public unpopularity and private distress. The great-uncle from whom he inherited his title ("The Wicked Lord") had killed a neighbor in a drunken fight that was more a brawl than a duel; his father, a rake and wastrel who had run through the fortunes of two heiresses, had had to flee to France to avoid arrest. But the great-uncle's seclusion at Newstead Abbey seems to have been largely a self-imposed eccentricity, and Jack Byron wanted only a new supply of cash to return to English society. By contrast, identification as a homosexual, in the press or by mere rumor, put one, whatever his rank, beyond the pale. The list of suspected peers and men of distinction who sought refuge on the Continent was long and continually growing in Byron's day. Above all and most notably, there was William Beckford. Beckford was the wealthiest man in England, but neither his wealth nor his aristocratic connections nor his talents as a writer and musician could save him from ten years of exile and a life of lonely ostracism once he was publicly accused of the

“nameless crime.” The phrase was Byron’s, and, as we shall see, Byron must have been strongly struck by the parallels in their situations.

Secular England condemned homosexuals for their “neglect” of women. Byron’s good looks, title, and glamour as a poet were to attract women powerfully, and he was far from unresponsive: his love affairs were many and famous. But if a failure to copulate heterosexually was an ostensible matter for criticism, orthodox amorousness could not save a man. Beckford was happily married and a father. Probably the majority of men pilloried or exiled were heads of families. Bentham had noted in 1774:

A proof that it is not any apprehension of the crime’s occasioning women to be neglected that occasions the abhorrence of this crime is, that a man who should be known to be indifferent, or even averse to women would not be the object of any such abhorrence, at least of any abhorrence near equal to it, if he were exempt from any suspicion of this crime; on the other hand, a man supposed to be guilty of it, though he were known to have a connection with never so many women would not find the detestation of him anything if at all abated by it.

As for literary genius weighing in the balance, the English have never been inclined to show the indulgence for art’s sake that France showed, for example, to Gide and Genet. The conviction and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde was to demonstrate this in the nineties, and E. M. Forster never dared publish his homosexual novel or his homosexual short stories during his long life.

Yet his fame has enabled us to determine the truth about Byron. He was the center of a remarkable amount of contemporary attention. Curious journalists culled every bit of gossip and jotted down all his opinions. More important still, his intimate friends and acquaintances wrote letters,

2. See p. 120.
diaries, and reminiscences, recorded conversations, and captured rumors. His wife, after he left her, had a potent incentive to horde every bit of damaging information she could against the possibility of a suit for the custody of their daughter. It was an articulate age when men and women wrote voluminously, often in an elaborately circumspect way that now seems absurdly stilted, but sometimes with a telling trenchancy. Byron himself was endlessly self-expressive in his poetry, letters, and journals. Most of what he hinted about the homosexual side of his nature was deliberately vague and mysterious: genders were changed in poems, codes used in letters, references made purposely ambiguous in autobiographical notes. As a result, what he wrote was almost certain to be read by the unaware reader, as Byron intended, in heterosexual terms. For someone as communicative and as naturally candid as Byron, these disguises must have cost some effort as he sought at once to celebrate and obscure, to share and disguise his feelings. One recalls Beckford's words about the discomfort of having to wear a mask that made his face ache.4 But Byron's obsessive need for confession has provided the evidence that has enabled us finally to grasp the complexity of his sexual being.

Puritiveness toward homosexuals and bisexuals in Byron's age was a public melodrama. But to understand how such men and women felt about themselves in private, we must be prepared to analyze the most delicate hints and subtlest nuances of human feeling and to draw conclusions with a full awareness of unresolved ambiguities. Our task is to catch the slow degrees by which Byron moved to an awareness of his identity as a bisexual. To do this, we must sift clues and interpret emotions that Byron himself probably did not understand at first. There is, to

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begin with, the problem of his precocity. Byron became heir to the family title at eight when the Wicked Lord’s son died. His own father had died when Byron was three, leaving only debts and a wife with a drastically diminished fortune. In 1798 Byron became a lord, and he and his mother escaped from a pinched life in Aberdeen, where he had attended grammar school, to comparative affluence in England. He was a peer at ten, and his emotional and sexual life seems to have developed correspondingly early. He fell in love with one female cousin, Mary Duff, when he was seven and another, Margaret Parker, when he was twelve. Of his initiation into sexual experience, he wrote darkly years later: “My passions were developed very early—so early—that few would believe me—if I were to state the period—and the facts which accompanied it.” He appears to be referring to his seduction at the age of nine by his Scottish nursemaid, May Gray, a devout Calvinist, who had also taught him his Bible lessons. Byron eventually complained of her attentions to the family lawyer, John Hanson, who had her dismissed. Byron speculated that this early introduction to sex had influenced him negatively: “Perhaps this was one of the reasons which caused the anticipated [i.e., precocious] melancholy of my thoughts—having anticipated life.—My earlier poems are the thoughts of one at least ten years older than the age at which they were written,—I don’t mean for their solidity, but their Experience.”

Byron entered Harrow in 1801. At first he did not especially like the school. Two years later he drove his mother (with whom his relations were to become increasingly strained) to despair by adamantly refusing to return for the

6. Byron’s negative reaction was somewhat unusual. In a survey of 796 college students, David Finkelhor found that 66 percent of the girls who had had sexual relations with adults as children had reacted negatively, but only 38 percent of the boys. “Boys report feeling more interest and pleasure at the time, and girls remember more fear and shock” (Sexually Victimized Children [New York: Free Press, 1979], p. 1).
autumn term. His intransigence was the result of frustrated love. He had become desperately enamored of a Nottinghamshire neighbor, Mary Chaworth, a relative of the man his great-uncle had killed. Mary was a pretty and flirtatious young woman, two years older than Byron and engaged to be married. She did not take him seriously and on one occasion referred to him disparagingly as "that lame boy" on account of his club foot. When she married John Musters, Byron was heartbroken. As if to prove the rule that un consummated love affairs are the most inspirational, she continued to haunt his imagination and poetry for many years.

When Byron returned to Harrow for a final year and a half, his emotional life centered on his relations with the school's younger boys. Later he was to recollect that "Hunter, Curzon, Long and Tattersall, were my principal friends, Clare, Dorset, Cs. Gordon, De Bath, Claridge and Jno. Wingfield, were my juniors and favourites, whom I spoilt by indulgence." The chief clues we have as to the nature of these relations are the poems Byron published after he had left Harrow for Cambridge. Byron's first collection, *Fugitive Pieces*, was privately printed in 1806 when he was eighteen; Byron suppressed it when a friend suggested that one poem portrayed heterosexual passion too candidly, and Jerome McGann, in his edition of Byron's poems, lists only four known copies. A second edition to which he added a number of new pieces appeared as *Poems on Various Occasions* in 1807, again privately printed. Later that year, his first published collection, *Hours of Idleness*, reprinted about half the poems in *Fugitive Pieces*, eight selections from the 1807 *Poems*, and a dozen new pieces. In 1808, three months after he had left Cambridge, Byron published a fourth collection, *Poems Original and Translated*, which added a few new compositions and dropped others.

Of these poems, a significant number are amorous

7. *Ifl*, 1:43.
verses conventionally addressed "To Caroline," "To Eliza," "To Mary," etc. The next largest group are the poems of friendship. These fall into three distinct classes: (1) poems to particular individuals, (2) poems on the psychology of friendship ("Childish Recollections" and "L'Amitié Est L'Amour Sans Ailes"), and (3) classical translations with possible homoerotic overtones. The majority belong to the first category. These include "To E——," "To D——" (i.e., Delawarr), "Epitaph on a Friend," "To the Duke of Dorset," "To Edward Noel Long," "To George, Earl Delawarr," and "To the Earl of Clare." Finally, there is one poem, published then suppressed, to his Cambridge friend, the choirboy John Edlestone: "The Cornelian." The dates of the first four imply they were written at Harrow; the rest appear to belong to Byron's college years.

Byron was later to tell his friend William Harness that his first poems (at age fourteen) were written to him.\footnote{February 16, 1808, \textit{BLJ}, 1:156.}\footnote{\textit{CPW}, 1:124.}\footnote{\textit{LJ}, 1:144.} Harness was a Harrow boy two years younger than Byron, also lame, whom Byron befriended and protected from a school bully. None of these verses, however, survives. The earliest extant poem, dated November 1802, "To E——," addresses someone below Byron's state in society. He expects this will cause comment, "Yet virtue will have greater claims / To love, than rank with vice combind.''}\footnote{Thomas Moore thought the poem was inspired by the son of one of Byron's tenants at Newstead Abbey, his family estate,\footnote{\textit{BB}, 1:103n.} but Leslie Marchand thinks that it was deliberately misdated and that "E" stands for John Edlestone, whom Byron did not meet until October 1805.\footnote{\textit{CPW}, 1:376–77.}} Thomas Moore thought the poem was inspired by the son of one of Byron's tenants at Newstead Abbey, his family estate,\footnote{\textit{BB}, 1:103n.} but Leslie Marchand thinks that it was deliberately misdated and that "E" stands for John Edlestone, whom Byron did not meet until October 1805.\footnote{\textit{CPW}, 1:376–77.}"'}
reflection of one of Byron's deepest and most troubling Harrow attachments. Its dedicatee, the Earl of Delawarr, seems to have had a potent hold on Byron's affections though their friendship did not run smoothly. "To D——" speaks of an estrangement; "envy" has somehow separated them. But they will be united in the afterworld: "On thy dear breast I'll lay my head, / Without thee! where would be my Heaven?" 12 A year and a half later Byron, then sixteen, wrote to Augusta about the thirteen-year-old:

You tell me you don't know my friend Ld. Delawarr. He is considerably younger than me, but the most good tempered, amiable, clever fellow in the universe. To all which he adds the quality (a good one in the eyes of women) of being remarkably handsome, almost too much so for a boy. He is at present very low in the school, not owing to his want of ability, but to his years. I am nearly at the top of it. By the rules of our Seminary he is under my power but is too good-natured ever to offend me, and I like him too well ever to exert my authority over him. 13

Then, after relating some difficulties with his mother over Lord Grey de Ruthyn, their tenant at Newstead Abbey, he continues: "You Augusta are the only relation I have who treats me as a friend . . . if you desert me, I have nobody I can love but Delawarr. If it was not for his sake, Harrow would be a desert, and I should dislike staying at it." 14 Byron testily forbids Augusta to burn his letters, but two later lines referring to Delawarr are crossed out. This is in itself a curious detail, which makes one wonder about the motive for the erasure.

Byron's letter to his sister was written two months after his return to Harrow following the Chaworth affair. Byron, reversing his early dislike, now fell in love with the school and a year later grieved at leaving it. His friendship with Delawarr, however, did not go well, and the later poem "To

12. February 1803, CPW, 1:126.
13. November 2, 1804, BLJ, 1:54.
14. Ibid.
George, Earl Delawarr," written in 1807 and added to Hours of Idleness, records a new, more lasting estrangement, which Byron nevertheless hopes time will heal. But Clare, Dorset, and Harness still claimed his heart. Byron was seriously upset when Clare on one occasion addressed him as "my dear Byron" rather than "my dearest Byron." Indeed, Clare retained a unique place in Byron's affection not only through college but up until the last years of his life, when he noted with surprise how strong the emotion he felt for his old friend was.

But what are we to make of these poems? Conventional, even banal in expression, does their phrasing give any significant hint of Byron's later homosexual involvements? First, we must note how much they vary in tone with the subject. "Epitaph on a Friend" (originally "Epitaph on a Beloved Friend") gives sentimentalism free rein in not very inspired verse. Like many in his age, Byron felt that death enhanced pathos, and weakened the taboo that set limits on protestations of devotion between males. Other poems, such as the verses to Edward Noel Long, fall clearly into the category of affectionate friendship, with no deeper overtones. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that Byron himself found the intensity of his emotions both puzzling and troubling. This comes out most clearly in "Childish Recollections," which he wrote when he was a sophomore at Cambridge looking back at his Harrow attachments. It was first published in Poems on Various Occasions and then suppressed in Poems Original and Translated because of a satirical sally he came to regret.

In this poem Byron nostalgically apostrophizes Harrow as "Ida," the mountain from which Jupiter carried off Ganymede. (Later he visited the region in his Eastern travels but reported seeing no eligible young shepherds.) Using classical epithets for each, he recalls his feelings for John Wingfield, John Tattersall, Clare, and Long. He now calls Delawarr "Euryalus" after the boy in an episode from
the *Aeneid* he was sufficiently struck by to translate in full shortly afterward. Despite their estrangement he declares:

That name is yet embalm'd, within my heart;  
Yet, at the mention, does my heart rebound,  
And palpitate, responsive to the sound.\(^{15}\)

Today, this sounds to us more like the language of love than friendship; we feel affection for our friends, we hardly “palpitate” at their names. Byron himself felt uncomfortable about his emotions and wondered why he should feel so attracted by his schoolfellows a year and a half after leaving Harrow. Even women’s love and beauty cannot, he tells us, extinguish what he has experienced. Surely this marks him as different from others:

Yet, why should I alone with such delight,  
Retrace the circuit of my former flight?  
Is there no cause beyond the common claim  
Endear’d to all in childhood’s very name?\(^{16}\)

Byron tries to explain his obsession on the ground that he has no father, brother, or sister at home, pointedly omitting the mother he was now at odds with over his extravagant spending.

The difficulties we face in interpreting these lines reveal the ambiguities that inevitably arise in any attempt to write about feelings between members of the same sex in other historical periods. How, in reading the poems or letters or fiction of the past, are we to distinguish between romantic friendship and homosexual love? Both may speak with intense devotion, both reflect strong passion. Can we ever be sure the feeling has or has not an erotic side to it? Modern “scientific” psychology is not always useful. By extending the term *homosexual* to include all affective relations between men or between women, Freud has obfuscated rather than clarified the issue. Usually friendship does not

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\(^{15}\) CPW, 1:168.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 165.
have an erotic basis. Occasionally it does, and in the latter case the relationship belongs to gay history.

We must, of course, recognize that different ages have different vocabularies for expressing emotion. Lover in Elizabethan English often meant only friend. Fashions in the expression of romantic friendship have varied. In early nineteenth-century England, as in France and Germany, such feelings were much in vogue and often found literary expression. This may seem paradoxical in the light of the strong taboo against homosexual relations, but a little reflection shows that it is not. Just as the incest taboo makes it possible in our society for near relatives to live together without censure or suspicion, so by treating homosexuality as something unthinkable, earlier ages in effect facilitated the expression of sentiment between members of the same sex. Romantic friendship did not disappear from modern literature until Krafft-Ebing and Freud began to be widely read. Relations that once seemed innocent now became equivocal and problematic in the light of contemporary sexology. Three disparate examples will demonstrate this. The first has a comic side. The Weimar monument to Goethe and Schiller shows the poets holding hands. In 1907 a cartoon appeared in the German magazine Jugend, which represented Schiller, on his pedestal, as anxiously detaching himself. The caption makes him say: "Wolfgang, let go of my hand! Here comes Magnus Hirschfeld!" The squib was meant to satirize the propensity of Hirschfeld (who was a precursor of Kinsey and the leader of the German homosexual rights movement) to find homosexuality everywhere. But it also marked, significantly, a growing self-consciousness about how men expressed their affection for each other. The same development took place in female friendships. Lillian Faderman has amply docu-

mented this in her comprehensive study of romantic friendship and love between women during the last four hundred years. For instance, sentimental love stories about schoolgirls' affection for each other were not uncommon in late nineteenth-century family magazines in America and appeared up until the time of World War I. After that date they faded from the scene as popular awareness of lesbianism grew and sophistication bred fear and shyness. Ernest Hemingway demonstrates this development clearly, on the male side, in The Sun Also Rises. There, another man, wishing to express his feelings for the hero on a fishing trip in Spain, tells him: "Listen. You're a hell of a good guy, and I'm fonder of you than anybody on earth. I couldn't tell you that in New York. It'd mean I was a faggot." There follow a series of extravagant whimsicalities; for instance, Abraham Lincoln loved Robert E. Lee, which caused the Civil War. Homosexuality is so threatening that the suspicion must be exorcised by elaborate jokes that demonstrate that the speaker is not naïve about the subject.

These anxieties were far rarer in Byron's day. Byron copied a line from Jean François Marmontel on the flyleaf of one of his notebooks: "Friendship, which in the world is scarcely even a sentiment, is a passion in cloisters." No doubt he saw a parallel between the monastery and the

18. See esp. Part II, chap. 2, "The 'Fashion' of Romantic Friendship in the Eighteenth Century," in Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow, 1981). Faderman quotes from correspondence between Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and her sister-in-law to be, between Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot, Anna Seward and Honora Sneyd, and Mary Wollstonecraft and Fanny Blood. She concludes that these passionate friendships did not necessarily carry any sexual overtures, being part of the accepted style of the day. Chaps. 1 and 2 of Part IIIA show the growing tendency to label such relations lesbian in the early twentieth century and to discourage them on this account.

19. The Sun Also Rises (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), chap. 12, p. 119.

20. Byron transcribed the passage in French and dated it 1808 (LJI, 1:421).
British public school. Nineteenth-century novels portrayed fervid schoolboy friendships in a style unimaginable today. In 1844 Disraeli could write quite un-self-consciously in his novel *Coningsby*:

At school, friendship is a passion. It entrains the being, it tears the soul. All loves of after-life can never bring its rapture, or its wretchedness; no bliss so absorbing, no pangs of jealousy or despair so crushing and so keen! What tenderness and what devotion! what illimitable confidence; infinite revelations of inmost thoughts; what ecstatic present and romantic future; what bitter estrangements and what melting reconciliations; what scenes of wild recrimination, agitating explanations, passionate correspondence; what insane sensitiveness, and what frantic sensibility; what earthquakes of the heart and whirlwinds of the soul are confined in that simple phrase, a schoolboy's friendship!21

Obviously this is a different world of feelings and manners from our own. If a modern novelist describes such friendships in our time, he feels constrained to call them "special." Yet two of Byron's friends, Shelley and Leigh Hunt, put on record such experiences as an important part of their youth. Here are Hunt's recollections in his *Autobiography*:

If I had reaped no other benefit from Christ Hospital, the school would be ever dear to me from the recollection of the friendships I formed in it, and of the first heavenly taste it gave me of that most spiritual of the affections. I use the word "heavenly" advisedly, and I call friendship the most spiritual of the affections, because even one's kindred, in partaking of our flesh and blood, become, in a manner, mixed up with our entire being. . . . If I ever tasted a disembodied transport on earth it was in those friendships which I entertained at school, before I dreamt of any maturer feeling. I shall never forget the impression it first made on me. I loved my friend for his gentleness, his candour, his truth, his good repute, his freedom even from my own livelier manner, his calm and reasonable kindness. . . . I smile to think of the perplexity (though he

never showed it) which he probably felt sometimes at my enthusiastic expressions, for I thought him a kind of angel.  

Shelley's account of a schoolboy friendship in his notebooks is similarly celebratory, but more sophisticated and discriminating. In his case there is a difference. Shelley was quite aware of the possibility of sexuality entering into the picture and deliberately denies its influence:

The nature of Love and Friendship is very little understood, and the distinction between them ill established. This latter feeling—at least a profound and sentimental attachment to one of the same sex, wholly divested of the smallest alloy of sensual intermixture, often precedes the former. It is not right to say, merely, that it is exempt from the smallest alloy of sensuality. It rejects, with disdain, all thoughts but those of an elevated and imaginative character and the process by which the attachment between two persons of different sexes terminates in a sensual union has not yet begun. I remember forming an attachment of this kind at school. I cannot recall to my memory the precise epoch at which this took place, but I imagine it must have been at the age of eleven or twelve. The object of these sentiments was a boy about my own age, of a character eminently generous, brave, and gentle; and the elements of human feeling seem to have been, from his birth, genially compounded within him. There was a delicacy and simplicity in his manners, inexpressibly attractive... The tones of his voice were so soft and winning, that every word pierced into my heart; and their pathos was so deep, that in listening to him the tears have involuntarily gushed from my eyes.  

Byron's relations with younger boys are often touchingly paternal. Their weakness seems to have regularly appealed to his protective instincts. But there are a few ominous notes. Editors have long debated who was the object of the satire in the sketch “Damaetas,” E. T. Coleridge,

in particular, arguing that the poem was not a self-portrait. But Jerome McGann has now discovered a manuscript of the poem in Byron's hand. It is headed "My Character," which clearly indicates that Byron was describing himself at nineteen in these lines:

In law an infant, and in years a boy,
In mind a slave to every vicious joy, . . .
Dameetas ran through all the maze of sin,
And found the goal, when others just begin.24

And "To the Duke of Dorset," addressed to Byron's ten-year-old "fag" when Byron was about to leave Harrow, though it begins with conventional advice to study and avoid flatterers, sounds a prophetic warning:

Tho' ev'ry Error stamps me for her own
And dooms my fall, I fain would fall alone.25

Byron obviously responded fully and passionately to the contemporary cult of friendship and felt licensed, by its conventions, to give full expression to such sentiments in his poetry. But were these experiences sexless? Or did Harrow see the first burgeoning of his homoeroticism, which was later to flower in Greece? The statistics published by Kinsey in our day show that a significant number of adolescent boys do indeed have sexual encounters with other males.26 There seems to have been little public discussion of this phenomenon in England in Byron's day when homosexuality was regarded as a heinous foreign importation. To admit that English schoolboys entered into such vice with no external prompting would have run counter to this theory. On the Continent, writers were more candid.

25. Ibid., p. 67.
26. Michael Schofield, in a study published in 1965, found that 28 percent of the boys at English boarding schools admitted taking part in homosexual relations, compared with 5 percent at coeducational schools. He implies these figures may be low (*The Sexual Behavior of Young People* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1965], p. 58).
Voltaire, in his essay in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, pours scornful contempt on adult male homosexuals but waxes almost lyrical over schoolboys:

> How did it come about that a vice which would destroy mankind if it were general, that a sordid outrage against nature, is still so natural? It seems the highest degree of deliberate corruption, and yet it is the ordinary lot of those who have not yet had time to be corrupted. . . . When the young males of our species, brought up together, feel the force which nature begins to unfold in them, and fail to find the natural object of their instinct, they fall back on what resembles it. Often, for two or three years, a young man resembles a beautiful girl, with the freshness of his complexion, the brilliance of his coloring, and the sweetness of his eyes; if he is loved, it’s because nature makes a mistake; homage is paid to the fair sex by attachment to one who owns its beauties, and when the years have made this resemblance disappear, the mistake ends.27

Beccaria, we saw, explained the prevalence of male homosexuality in Italy as due to “those institutions, packed with hot-blooded youth [whose] natural vigour, as it develops, is faced with insurmountable obstacles to every other kind of relationship.”28 This was also the view of Montesquieu: “The crime against nature will never make any great progress in society unless people are prompted to it by some particular custom, as among the Greeks, where the youths of that country performed all their exercises naked; [or] as amongst us, where domestic education is disused.”29 In England, though attacks were made on the prevalence of homosexuality at the universities, little was said in public in the eighteenth century about the public schools. But Bentham in his essay of 1785 endorsed Montesquieu’s opinion. Pointing to the strict segregation of boys and girls

and comparing England with ancient Greece, he remarked: "On the present plan [boys] are often forced together under circumstances still more favourable to it [i.e., homosexuality] by the custom of lying naked together in feather beds, implements of indulgence and incentives to the venereal appetite with which the ancients were unacquainted." Presumably, Bentham had in mind the tradition of boys sharing beds in boarding schools. At Eton it was the custom for masters to lock boys into dormitories at eight o'clock and to leave them unattended: the authorities took no responsibility for their behavior "after school." The liberal clergyman Sydney Smith described the typical English public school in 1810 as "a system of premature debauchery that only prevents men from being corrupted by the world by corrupting them before their entry into the world." His language is deliberately vague and general but was meant no doubt to cover both hetero- and homosexual experimentation. The language of schoolboys was less philosophical than Bentham's and Smith's. Thackeray has left it on record that on his arrival at Charterhouse in 1817 the first order he received from a schoolmate was "Come & frig me." As to Harrow, a note to Don Leon appended in 1842 recorded: "Some twenty years ago . . . an allusion was made in the public papers to certain rumours which had spread about concerning the unnatural propensities of the boys in Harrow school." John Addington Symonds, who arrived at Harrow about a decade later, painted a lurid picture. Montgomery Hyde, paraphrasing Symonds's un-

published autobiography, tells us: “Every boy of good looks had a female nickname, and a boy who yielded his person to an older lover was known as the elder lad’s ‘bitch.’” According to Symonds: “The talk in the dormitories and studies was of the grossest character, with repulsive scenes of onanism, mutual masturbation and obscene orgies of naked boys in bed together.”

From the very first, Byron’s biographers were forced to take note of his large number of schoolboy favorites and the intensity of his passion for them. Thomas Moore, writing in 1830, a few years after Byron’s death, must have felt he was facing a delicate and embarrassing topic in broaching the subject. But Byron’s poems were in everyone’s hands, and his relations with boys like John Edleston and Nicolo Giraud obviously called for some kind of comment. It is not surprising that Moore in his Life of Byron should have invoked the contemporary cult of romantic friendship to explain such passions:

One of the most striking results of the English system of education is, that while in no country are there so many instances of manly friendships early formed and steadily maintained, so in no other country, perhaps, are the feelings towards the paternal home so early estranged, or, at the best, feebly cherished. Transplanted as boys are from the domestic circle, at a time of life when the affections are most inclined to cling, it is but natural that they should seek a substitute for ties of home in those boyish friendships which they form at school, and which, connected as they are with the scenes and events over which youth threw its charm, retain ever after the strongest hold upon their hearts. . . [Moore then notes that in France and Ireland this is not so.]

To a youth like Byron, abounding with the most passionate feelings, and finding sympathy with only the ruder parts of his nature at home, the little world of school afforded a vent for his affections, which was sure to call them forth in their most ardent form. Accordingly, the friendships which he con-