

BYRON AND
GREEK LOVE
HOMOPHOBIA IN
19th-CENTURY ENGLAND

LOUIS CROMPTON

University of California Press

Berkeley
Los Angeles

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 1985 by

The Regents of the University of California

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Crompton, Louis, 1925-

Byron and Greek love.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Byron, George Gordon Byron, Baron, 1788-1824.
2. Homosexuality, Male, in literature. 3. Homosexuality, Male—Great Britain—History—19th century. 4. Sex in literature. 5. Poets, English—19th century—Biography.

I. Title.

PR4392.H56C7 1985 821'.7 84-16463

ISBN 0-520-05172-6

For Luis Diaz-Perdomo



Contents

Acknowledgments and Permissions ix

List of Abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1

1

Georgian Homophobia 12

2

Byron at School 63

3

To the East 107

4

England and "Thyrza" 158

5

Fame and Exile 196

6

Perspectives: 1816–1821 236

7

"Not Paul but Jesus" 251

8

Shelley—Clogher—Castlereagh 284

9

Love and Death in Missolonghi 312

viii Contents

Epilogue: The Truth Appears	338
Appendix: The Bentham Manuscripts	383
Index	387

Acknowledgments and Permissions

I am much indebted to Mrs. J. Percival and the staff of the D. M. S. Watson Library for providing me with xeroxes and microfilms of Jeremy Bentham's manuscripts on the subject of homosexuality in the possession of University College, London, and for answering inquiries. I owe a special debt to my friend and former colleague Professor Frank Rice, of the Department of English of the University of Nebraska, for devoting many months to helping decipher hundreds of pages of Bentham's difficult hand. I regret only that he did not live to see the final results of his labors. I have also been aided in this task of transcription by David Seward, to whom I would also like to express my thanks. Throughout this lengthy project I have been encouraged by the warm support of my friend Dr. Arthur Warner of Princeton.

I wish to thank Peter W. Graham for replying to inquiries about the correspondence of John Cam Hobhouse and Jerome McGann, John Murray, and Doris Langley Moore for taking time to respond generously to my questions about Byron documents. The latter has also kindly granted permission to quote extensively from her two studies, *The Late Lord Byron: Posthumous Dramas* and *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered*. However, Mrs. Moore has not read the manuscript of the present study, and her generosity should not be interpreted as an endorsement of its conclusions. It is her view that "Byron was telling the perfect truth when he said his heart always alighted on the nearest perch, and when there were women about (which was not the case, for instance, in a Cambridge college) the perch was likely to be feminine." Insofar as this implies that

Byron was a bisexual in whom the heterosexual element predominated, I certainly agree. However, it seems to me that the heterosexual-homosexual balance in Byron's make-up shifted from time to time, and I have tried to analyze and—to the extent that such mysteries can be accounted for—give some suggestions as to why the homosexual side of his nature came to the fore at certain moments of his life.

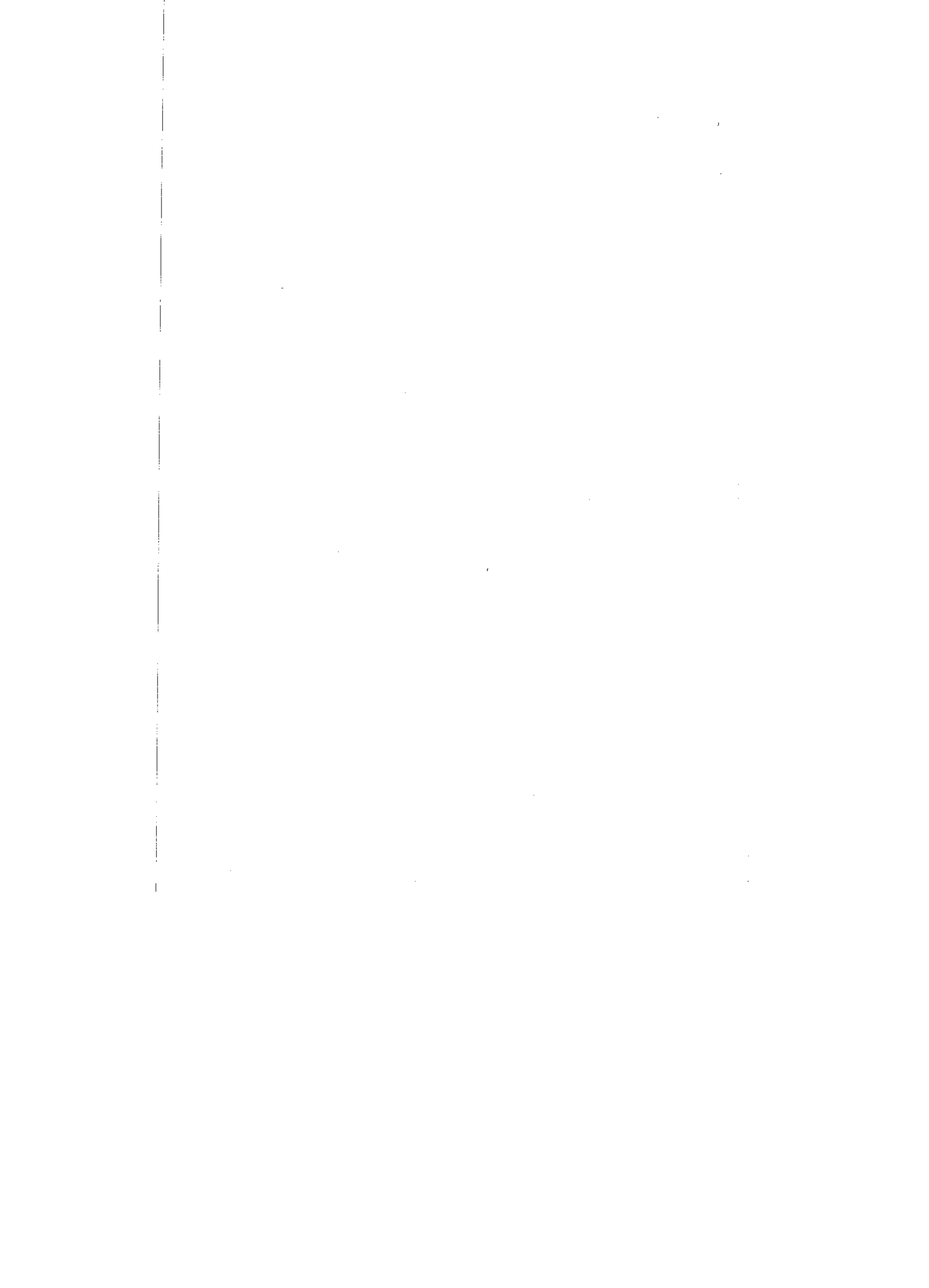
Kathryn McGinnis and the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Service at the University of Nebraska, Scott Stebelman, Humanities Librarian, and Eva Sartori of the Humanities-Social Sciences Division of Love Library have all rendered valuable assistance in tracking down rare books and periodicals. Valdis Leinieks, Thomas Winter, and Thomas Rinkevich of the Department of Classics have patiently borne with queries and cheerfully responded to them. Hugh Luke of the Department of English has kindly made available to me his collection of Byroniana and rare early nineteenth-century books and pamphlets.

Above all, I am grateful to Cid Donnelly-Nixon for the patience, accuracy, and perspicuity she has brought to the typing of my manuscript and for exercising something like divination in deciphering its much scribbled-over pages.

Permission has been granted by copyright holders to quote from the following works: Duke University Press—James A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind*, 1949; the Estate of Malcolm Elwin—*Lord Byron's Wife*, 1962, and *Lord Byron's Family*, 1975; John Murray—*Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols., ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 1973–1982; Oxford University Press—Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, vols. 1–3, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 1980–1981. In quoting from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources, I have regularly retained the writer's idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of italics. However, for the sake of clarity and ease of comprehension, I have sometimes substituted periods in Byron's letters when he himself has used commas to separate sentences.

I have been assisted in the writing of this study by a Faculty Development Fellowship from the Department of English of the University of Nebraska.

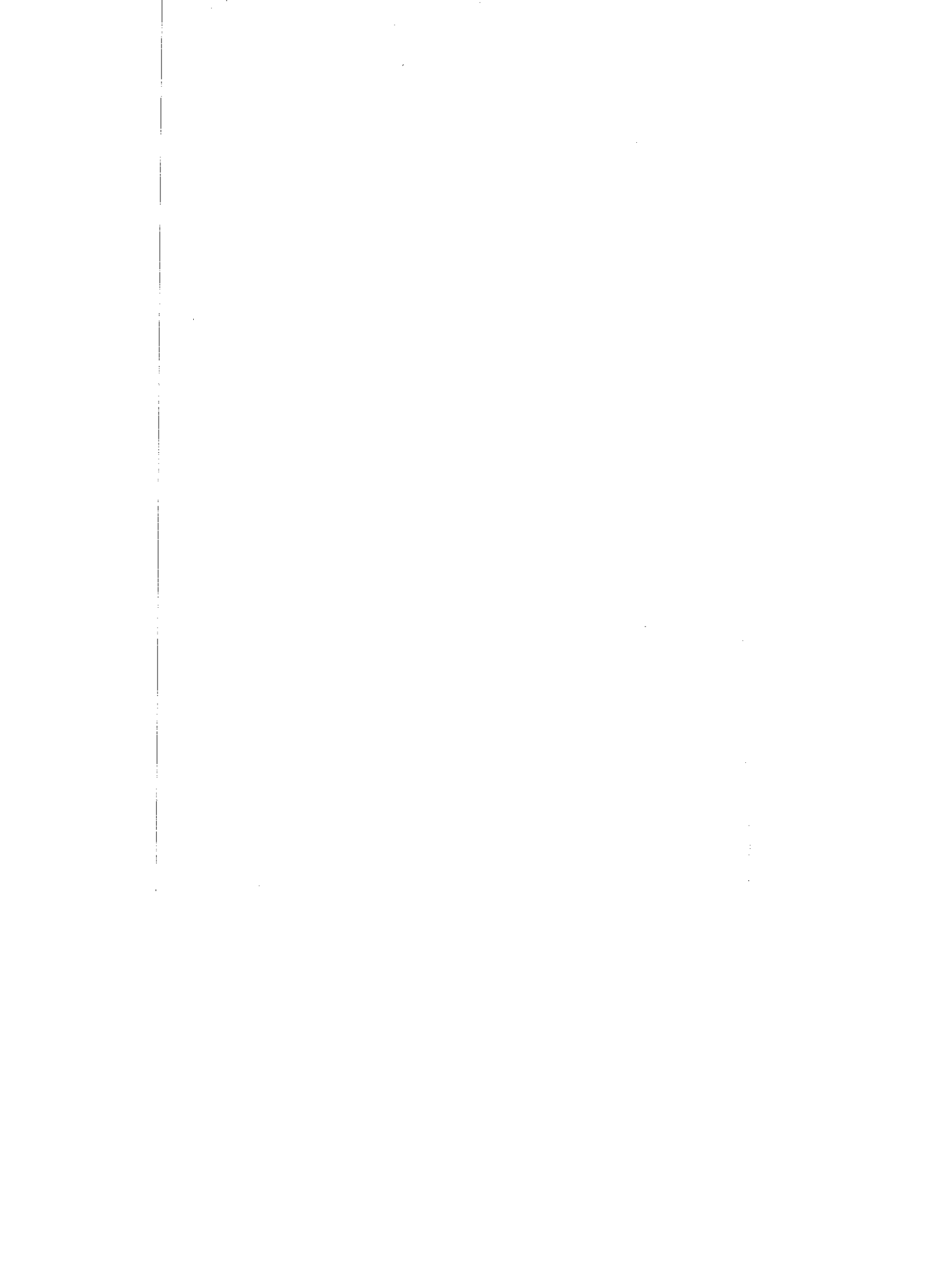
Part of the epilogue to this book appeared, in slightly different form, in the *Journal of Homosexuality* 8 (Spring-Summer 1983) and in *Literary Visions of Homosexuality*, ed. Stuart Kellogg (New York: Haworth Press, 1983).



List of Abbreviations

The following works are referred to in the notes by abbreviations:

- BB** Leslie A. Marchand. *Byron: A Biography*. 3 vols. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957.
- BLJ** *Byron's Letters and Journals*. Edited by Leslie A. Marchand. 12 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973–1982.
- CPW** Lord Byron. *The Complete Poetical Works*. Edited by Jerome J. McGann. Vols. 1–3. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–1981.
- LBAR** Doris Langley Moore. *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered*. London: John Murray, 1974.
- LJL** Thomas Moore. *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron with Notices of His Life*. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1830.
- LLB** Doris Langley Moore. *The Late Lord Byron: Posthumous Dramas*. Rev. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.



Introduction

This book is the offshoot of a wider scheme, rashly entertained, to write a history of attitudes toward homosexuality in Western civilization. Originally my plan called for an essay of fifty or sixty pages on Byron that would combine biographical, historical, literary, legal, and religious themes, as an experiment in interdisciplinary gay studies. What first drew me to the early nineteenth century was not, in fact, Byron, but the discovery of an unprecedented number of executions of homosexuals in England in the statistical reports of his day. In the centuries between the Inquisition and Hitler this suggested a persecution of perhaps unparalleled duration and intensity and raised the question of its social origins. Why should England, of all countries, with its reputation as a pioneer in civic freedom, have experienced so ugly an episode?

But statistical tables, though telling, need humanizing. Few victims of earlier homophobic witch hunts have left records of their lives. We do not know what it was like to face the agents of Justinian and Theodora, of Torquemada, or of the Dutch courts in 1730. Friends and relatives, including parents and children, were more likely to disown the victims than to collect memorials in such cases. Would it be possible to find someone who would reflect the pressures of this social terror in his personal life? It would have to be a man since lesbians in England (unlike their sisters in Europe) were not criminals under the law.

William Beckford was one possible choice, but his early ostracism removed him from English society too completely. It was the discovery of G. Wilson Knight's *Lord*

Byron's Marriage (1957) that suggested an alternative; Knight's study showed in detail how, at certain periods of his short career, Byron's deepest emotions were stirred by love for his own sex. The problem was whether it could be established beyond a doubt that these feelings were unequivocally homosexual and whether there was evidence that Byron's writings reflected Regency anxieties. Fortunately, the meticulously detailed biographical studies of Leslie Marchand and Doris Langley Moore that appeared shortly after Knight's book placed the first matter beyond a doubt though they showed little or no awareness of the background of persecution.

What swung the balance finally in favor of this undertaking was a chance discovery. Browsing through the legal section of the main library of Indiana University in Bloomington on a weekend when the Kinsey Institute was closed, I stumbled on C. K. Ogden's 1931 edition of Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Legislation* with its appendix entitled "Bentham on Sex." Had Bentham ever been interested in the law and homosexuality? Ogden's prefatory note, written in the typically veiled style of the day, revealed that he had. The abstruse excerpts from Bentham that Ogden had transcribed showed a keen, even passionate, interest in the subject. An appeal to the D. M. S. Watson Library at University College, London, eventually produced over five hundred manuscript pages, all, except for Ogden's short extracts, unpublished, composed over a period of more than fifty years. They were remarkably far-ranging in their perspectives, analyzing the subject from a legal, moral, psychological, anthropological, and even a literary point of view. What was more remarkable was that Bentham, in an age of acute prejudice, looked at the social phenomenon of homophobia from a position that had more in common with the late twentieth century than with his own era.

The effort to touch on all this in a short essay inevitably proved a ludicrous failure. Step by step, the project grew into a book. To set the stage for and explain the frenzy

of the Regency persecutions, it was necessary to look at eighteenth-century opinion in England. A reading of poets and novelists, theologians, journal writers, and historians, along with newspapers, political speeches, reports of religious societies, and popular pamphlets, helped explain what in the history of the time produced so hostile a milieu, whose decades of greatest animosity coincided almost exactly with Byron's lifetime. The result was the first chapter of this study, which serves as a prelude to the story of Byron's own pederastic involvements. Bentham's first writings on homosexuality are contemporaneous with the careers of Gibbon and Burke; his subsequent (and even more voluminous) notes belong to the age of Byron and Shelley and are discussed after the account of Byron's marriage and exile. Shelley's own essay on Greek homosexuality, until recently almost totally ignored, seemed also worth exploring not only because Shelley was Byron's friend and contemporary but also because the essay reveals the contrary views of a very different liberal. Shelley's death preceded by a few days two sensational national scandals: the arrest of the Bishop of Clogher on a homosexual charge and the suicide of Lord Castlereagh, who had been blackmailed and threatened with exposure. Chronologically, these episodes form a prelude to Byron's last journey to Greece.

My chapters on Byron are overwhelmingly indebted to three predecessors. Knight, in *Lord Byron's Marriage*, identified significant passages by and about Byron that still remain central to any discussion of this side of his life. Like all other recent writers on Byron, I have pillaged Leslie Marchand's three-volume biography, which also appeared in 1957 and confirmed Knight's conjectures (on this theme at least) and added much crucial new evidence. Constrained by the prejudices of others whose cooperation he was dependent on, Marchand obviously did not feel free to be overly explicit. He addresses the subject directly only once, in a significant note. As a result, his treatment of

Byron's bisexuality, though extremely perceptive, is so subtle and so interwoven with other matter that even highly sophisticated readers have failed to grasp the significance of his discoveries and comments. Marchand's work has since been supplemented by two important specialized studies by Doris Langley Moore. Both *The Late Lord Byron* (first published in 1961) and *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered* (1974) include important new materials that help us understand how Byron's close associates regarded his homosexuality. Moore has summarized her views in an essay titled "Byron's Sexual Ambivalence," appended to her second book; though brief, it is sympathetic and generally just in its conclusions. I have come to disagree with her findings on only a few points. My final chapter steals another idea from her by examining the writings of Byron's critics and biographers to see how they treated this highly controversial matter in the books and essays that have appeared since his death.

Until well into the twentieth century the record shows much deliberate suppression and obfuscation. In part, this sprang from the taboo against any discussion of homosexuality in England. The "discursive explosion" Michel Foucault purports to have discovered in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French sexology did not cross the channel. Nowhere did English Francophobia find more impassioned expression than in attitudes toward sex. English jurists congratulated themselves that no counterpart to the forensic studies in French existed in their language, and the courts ordered the first English scientific text on homosexuality destroyed shortly after its appearance in 1898. The earliest important account of Byron's bisexuality suffered a similar fate; circulating only as an underground pamphlet by an anonymous poet, *Don Leon* (1866) was also suppressed when the Fortune Press published it in the 1930s.

In attempting to reconstruct and understand the past, gay studies face two specific critical problems—the identi-

fication of documents and their interpretation. Homophobia has made both of these tasks difficult. Many literary texts have not survived. Sappho's poems, for example, were ordered destroyed by the Bishop of Constantinople in the fourth century. It was probably not just the vagaries of time that decreed that the well-documented plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides on the theme of Greek love should disappear. Byron himself was persuaded by his friend John Cam Hobhouse to destroy his early Cambridge journals, probably the most revealing of all his autobiographical writings on this subject. It is likely that fears of possible revelations about homosexuality were among the concerns that moved his friend after Byron's death to insist on the burning of Byron's memoirs. Hobhouse certainly destroyed manuscript poems on the subject. Thomas Moore published extracts from the surviving journals in his biography of Byron in 1830, but only after deleting passages touching on this topic, replacing them with asterisks, and destroying the originals. Some letters were similarly expurgated. Others have survived despite excisions so that we can now see what was cut out. Leslie Marchand's superb new edition includes much candid correspondence formerly omitted and deciphers the code by which Byron communicated his homosexual adventures to Hobhouse in England.

Literature from earlier ages on homosexual themes has not always been destroyed. Bowdlerization has been an alternative strategy for editors. Translators of Greek and Latin poetry have, until recently, often juggled genders to disguise the homoerotic nature of the originals. In Byron's day Persian poetry underwent a similar metamorphosis. Michelangelo's poems were revised by his great-nephew to remove references to his love for Tommaso Cavalieri. The first editor of Shakespeare's sonnets changed some male pronouns to female and scrambled their order, blurring the distinction between poems addressed to the young man and those written to the dark lady: this explains why

the controversy over their possible homosexual implications did not surface until so late as 1780, a few years before Byron was born. It is not surprising that Byron removed passages about the homosexuality of some of his famous contemporaries from the draft of the first canto of *Childe Harold* or that he felt he had to pretend that a series of poems he wrote celebrating a male love affair was addressed to a woman.

When we turn to interpretation, the central issue confronting gay studies may be called "the friendship problem." If a novel, poem, or essay describes or expresses ardent feelings for a member of the same sex, when are we to interpret these as homosexual and when are we to regard them merely as reflections of what is usually called romantic friendship? We may be genuinely perplexed by Shakespeare's sonnets, by Montaigne's account of his love for Etienne de La Boëtie, or by Mary Wollstonecraft's novels, Melville's stories, and Emily Dickinson's poems. In Byron's day there was a popular cult of romantic friendship to which Byron as a boy had wholeheartedly responded. Many of his early poems were certainly inspired by it. But he also went beyond this by falling in love with boys and (at least during part of his early life) by becoming a homosexual lover in the physical sense. The second chapter of this study discusses these problems from a historical and cross-cultural point of view.

Accorded an honored place in Greek, Latin, Islamic, and Far Eastern literature, love poems addressed by males to other males have generally been taboo in postclassical Western civilization. Andreas Capellanus undoubtedly described the norm of his culture when he laid down the rule that love could exist only between persons of the opposite sex, all else being "unnatural," and eighteenth-century England was, if anything, even more certain that poems addressed to youths were impious and immoral.

In the light of this tradition, interpreters have often refused to find a homosexual meaning in poetry unless

conclusive biographical evidence has been forthcoming, and this, for obvious reasons, has often been the most incomplete part of the personal record. Yet in Byron's case the miracle is how much has now come to light. If Hobhouse presided over the burning of Byron's memoirs, he nevertheless preserved crucial correspondence and poems. Marchand has published a very revealing note from Byron to their common friend, Charles Skinner Matthews. Though this book, as far as Byron is concerned, relies almost entirely on published documents, it does present for the first time the text of two remarkable letters in which Matthews replied to Byron; these show how their Cambridge circle looked at their shared pederastic interests and the fears with which they observed the hostility of English society. For other clues, Marchand's new edition of the letters has proved invaluable. In preparing his biography, Marchand did not have access to the Lovelace papers, which contain Lady Byron's memoranda. Doris Langley Moore's *Late Lord Byron* includes very important excerpts from the latter source. Malcolm Elwin's *Lord Byron's Wife* (1962), which quotes extensively from these papers, has also yielded much new information though Elwin himself tends to downplay the issue of homosexuality and often, one feels, fails to see the significance of all he quotes. Jerome McGann's comprehensive new edition of the poetry (the first since the turn of the century) has been consulted and has provided useful information on the genesis of problematic poems.

One novelty of my approach is that I have tried to shape this deluge of new material into a narrative. Knight's book, though it discusses Byron's homosexuality at length, does not present a connected story, with the result that it is easily intelligible only to specialists. Anyone trying to follow the theme of Byron's bisexuality through Marchand has to disentangle his oblique hints from an overwhelming mass of other materials. Moore's new discoveries are scattered, except in her brief essay. Though the story of Byron's

life has been told many times, I have tried to provide at least minimal background information in order that this book be accessible and meaningful to the nonspecialist. Not surprisingly, a century of repression of the truth has inevitably produced its own reaction: Harold Bloom in his Oxford anthology of *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (1973) calls Byron "basically homosexual." But this is a mistake in the other direction. Byron's heterosexual impulses were fully as real as his homosexual ones and, if we take his life as a whole, more persistent and significant though (apart from his incest with his sister) less dramatically threatening. Since Byron was not exclusively homosexual even in the period this book focuses on, namely, the years 1807 to 1816, I have interwoven a brief account of his heterosexual affairs and of his disastrous marriage. After 1816 his homosexual side seems to vanish until his last days at Missolonghi when his early feelings revived in full force in his love for the youthful Lukas Chalandrutsanos.

Does Byron's bisexuality explain the psychology of the so-called Byronic hero? When we consider the extreme animus felt toward homosexuals in Byron's England, with its hangings, pilloryings, ostracism, and exiles, this is a tempting theory. English homophobia in itself seems more than enough to explain the gloom, alienation, wounded pride, and guilt embodied in the literary archetype that in many ways reflected Byron's own personality. At first such an interpretation seemed strongly appealing. But on consideration I have come to regard this as a powerfully aggravating influence rather than the unique explanation of "Byronism." Byron's intense sense of guilt had many sources and seems almost to have formed the essence of his identity. For Byron, to be was to be guilty, a condition rendered all the more painful by the fact that he could not accept the conventional idea of religious atonement. But English contempt for unorthodox sexual dispositions must have dramatically exacerbated an already painful condi-

tion. Byron himself hinted that his bisexuality was an important key to his poetic personality.

In treating homosexuality in a historical context, whether the subject is biography or social history, a serious dilemma inevitably faces any writer. This is the dilemma of vocabulary. The problem is especially acute when the writer seeks to address two different audiences—in this case a general audience and America's newly self-aware gay community, whose vocabularies differ. "It is by the power of names, of signs originally arbitrary and insignificant, that the course of imagination has in great measure been guided."¹ So Bentham wrote of the language used by his contemporaries to refer to homosexuality. The language problem, as we may call it, is one that inevitably obtrudes in the following pages. The language of Byron's era was uniformly hostile, often violently so, where homosexuality was concerned. This rhetoric of abuse was remarkably pervasive—it is to be found in Tobias Smollett's diatribes, in the venomous piety of Hester Thrale, in Gibbon's moralistic analyses, and even in Burke's eloquent appeal for reform. Byron himself uses it, as when he remarked in a note to *Childe Harold* that "the death of Antinous was as heroic as his life was infamous."² Even Bentham employs the conventional pejorative language of the day in his early notes and in his one essay on the subject. It was not until late in life that he reacted against this vituperative style and tried to coin a new vocabulary free from its negative implications.

One reason I have been unusually liberal with quotations is to let the reader experience the language of Byron's contemporaries and thus realize their mind-set at first hand. This may help historians to become more aware of

1. Bentham manuscripts, University College, London; Code Penal, April 25, 1814, box 74a, folio 175. For a description of these manuscripts, see the appendix.

2. *CPW*, 2:190.

the elaborate circumlocutions by which Georgian England spoke of homosexuality and to feel more assurance in deciphering obscure references. There are also other reasons for this amplitude of quotation. The passages from Bentham's unpublished notes are, by and large, otherwise inaccessible. So too (comparatively speaking) are many of the newspapers and pamphlets I draw on. In the case of Byron's descriptions of his own experiences, the motivation was different. We are all understandably skeptical in reading interpretations of purported references to homosexuality in older literature, letters, and journals. We often wonder if a commentator is reading more into a passage than the actual words will bear, or, on the other hand, whether he or she is missing important implications. Consequently, I have tried to be generous in quoting essential passages at length. There is, of course, an incidental dividend. Byron's prose has a racy liveliness unmatched in epistolary literature and a surer style than many of his poems.

But if the language of Byron's age poses difficulties through its bias or indirectness, the language in which the modern critic analyzes the subject raises other issues. In essence this is because of our position on a linguistic watershed. America's gay community (like those of other English-speaking countries) speaks and writes of gay rights, gay pride, gay consciousness, and gay history; these terms still seem strange to others principally because the point of view they signify is so novel. The worlds of journalism and politics are rapidly assimilating this new vocabulary. Academic bodies traditionally move more slowly though most scholarly disciplines with nationally organized associations now have gay caucuses, and the Modern Language Association has formally recognized a Division of Gay Studies in Language and Literature. My aim, as a gay scholar, has not been simply to revive forgotten history but to re-perceive it and Byron's career in the light of this developing consciousness. This aim has natu-

rally forced some hard decisions. Frequently, I felt the adjective *gay* to be too startlingly anachronistic in this context, though the word I do use—*homosexual*—would have sounded quite as strange to Byron or his contemporaries. I have consequently used the term *gay* sparingly, usually restricting it to ideas that could not be expressed otherwise—“gay consciousness,” for instance.

But if *homosexual* and *gay* are both words that would have puzzled Byron's contemporaries, the expression *Greek love*—which I have used in the title of this work—would have been intelligible to them and would have carried resonant historical and literary associations. From moral prejudice, scholars in England had made an effort to keep a knowledge of the ancient Greeks' approval of male homosexuality from men and women who could not read the relevant documents in their original language. But to anyone as intimately familiar with the classics as Byron was, the phrase would have brought immediately to mind such poetic or historical traditions as the legends of Ganymede and Hyacinth, the exploits of Aristogiton and Harmodius, and the story of Antinous. Indeed, Byron himself refers to all of these in his writings. He was, if anything, even more familiar with the classical tradition of male love as it was reflected in the Latin of Catullus, Horace, Virgil and Petronius. Byron was to translate or quote homoerotic passages from all these writers, in moods that varied from the heroic to the playful. In his Cambridge circle, “Horatian” became a code word for “bisexual.” But Italy in the early nineteenth century did not offer the classical freedom which the Turkish conquest had restored to Greece in sexual, if not in political, matters. There, as the *Don Leon* poet put it, no “erotic statutes” prevailed, and it was to Greece that Byron as a young man was to make his way, as he was to die there later in that country's struggle for liberty.

Georgian Homophobia

The purpose of this book is to analyze the homosexual side of Byron's temperament in the light of the attitudes toward such feelings in his day. A dawning awareness of his bisexual nature troubled Byron's adolescence and was important in inspiring his first trip to Greece and Turkey. After his separation from his wife, rumors of his erotic adventures in the East began to circulate in England and helped create the hostile atmosphere that drove him abroad once again. During his second exile his passion for boys seems to have been in abeyance. But in the last months of his life, in peculiarly tense and trying circumstances, this strain in his nature reasserted itself, like a thread of lost color re-emerging at the edge of the cloth. The evidence—conclusive at some points, obscure and ambiguous at others—that elucidates this aspect of Byron is to be found throughout the poet's numerous letters, journals, and poems, as well as in the diaries and memoranda of his enemies and friends. These documents will be considered in due course in later chapters.¹ Before we can fully understand them, we must first enlighten ourselves about the views on homosexuality held by the society into which Byron was born.

Much has been written about the fate of such despised or feared groups as Jews, witches, and heretics in Euro-

1. G. Wilson Knight discusses Byron's bisexuality at length in *Lord Byron's Marriage: The Evidence of Asterisks* (New York: Macmillan, 1957); see esp. chaps. 1, 5, 7. Much new evidence has, however, come to light as a result of the researches of Leslie Marchand and Doris Langley Moore. For a good, brief account that considers later findings, see Moore's "Appendix 2: Byron's Sexual Ambivalence," in *LBAR*, pp. 437-59.