tion with a degree of zeal which no other species of criminality is sufficient to inspire. [Even] the consequence of being reputed guilty [is] attended with a degree of infamy which can be compared to nothing so properly as that which attends forfeiture of caste among the Hindoes. 82

Once he had left England, Byron's mood was not one of philosophical reflection but of indignant fury. When Hobhouse chided him for the satire on his wife in Don Juan, he replied: "Was it not owing to that 'Porca buzzzerena' that they tried to expose me upon Earth to the same stigma—which . . . Jacopo is saddled with in hell?" 83 (Jacopo Rusticucci was confined to the circle of the sodomites in Dante's Inferno.) Nor was his later bitterness confined to his feelings toward his wife. As English morality had mobilized a whole society against him, so Byron's hatred extended to his nation generally. Shortly afterward he wrote to Murray: "I am sure my Bones would not rest in an English grave—or my Clay mix with the earth of that Country:—I believe the thought would drive me mad on my death-bed could I suppose that any of my friends would be base enough to convey my carcase back to your soil—I would not even feed your worms—if I could help it." 84

83. Venice, May 17, 1819, BLJ, 6:131. "Porca" means sow; "buzzzerena" is a Venetian dialect term derived from "buggerone," a "sodomite."
84. Bologna, June 7, 1819, BLJ, 6:149.
In the second epoch of his life, after his rise to fame, Byron had taken his place among the literary, social, and political elite of his native land. At the beginning of 1816 he was a husband, a father, a best-selling author, a sought-after member of society, and a voting member of the House of Lords. Five months later, he was separated from his wife, his daughter, his sister, his male friends, Parliament, and his estate, with only his reputation as a poet untouched. Homosexuality, as we have seen, played a fateful part in this change in fortunes. Ironically, it now ceased (so far as we know) to be an important part of his experience until the final months of his life. At this point, then, it may be appropriate to glance back.

The traditional view of Byron, which held sway for more than a century, was that of a fervent womanizer tout simple; more recently this has been superseded by the admission that homosexuality played a minor but hardly significant part in his youthful life. The aim of this study has been to show that it meant more than this. It now seems possible to argue, on the basis of the evidence, that Byron's bisexuality was far more central to his experience and personality than his biographers have so far been willing to grant. Whatever feelings he had about his initiation by Lord Grey, the experience revealed to him a side of his being that left him frightened, excited, perplexed, and, on occasion, exalted. At Harrow, at Cambridge, in Greece, and in the four years after he returned to England this knowledge haunted him. His love for his Harrow friends and for John Edlestone, his anticipations of adventures in Greece, his
encounters with Eustathios Georgiou and Nicolo Giraud, his grief for "Thyrza," his revelations to Lady Caroline and Augusta, all formed part of a drama that we can now understand. This, in turn, enables us to perceive more fully the background of Byron's unfortunate marriage. More important, we can now comprehend him as a man who felt himself, by his very nature, an anomaly in his own society. For years he knew he would be rejected with contumely in England if he were known for what he was, and at last his fears proved true.

To a degree, Byron shared a number of important characteristics that have inevitably been part of the life experiences of most gay men and women in Christian societies: hidden desires, alienation, paranoia, and a sense of solidarity with others with similar natures. But though he could not reveal the truth directly in his work, he nevertheless wrote the suppressed lines on Beckford and Ali Pasha, penned the "Greek epistles" to Hobhouse, spoke through the mask of the Thyrza lyrics, and made confessions, veiled or direct, to the women in his life, with what consequences we have seen. Later he was to express himself with painful candor in the Lukas poems, written during his final days in Greece but hidden from public view for some six decades after his death. His fears are shown in his conviction that it was impossible for him to live in England, in his anxiety over the fate of his letters to Hobhouse, in his confession to Lady Caroline, and in his suicidal threats during the separation scandal. His devotion appears in the Thyrza and Lukas poems and in his sense of solidarity with other homosexuals—the weakest side of his "gay sensibility"—in his correspondence with Matthews.

If Lord Grey and Ali Pasha were charmed by Byron's boyish beauty, Byron himself was drawn only to adolescents in the classical Greek fashion. Like many pederasts he was first attracted to boys when he was hardly more than a boy himself. The three boys to whom he was most
strongly attached—John Edlestone, Nicolo Giraud, and Lukas Chalandrutsanos—were all fifteen when he fell in love with them. The relation of patron and protégé was one that Byron’s aristocratic and paternal instincts made particularly congenial to him. Where his relations with women were often strained or stormy, his love for Edlestone and Giraud seems to have been unclouded. No difficulties arose with the boys’ families. No doubt they were pleased that their sons or brothers had won the attention of a wealthy, influential nobleman. How much they guessed of the sexual part of Byron’s attachment we cannot know. In our day and age we speak of the sexual exploitation of the young. This may occur, but in such affairs it is often the emotional vulnerability of the older male that makes him most open to exploitation, as Byron’s later attachment to Lukas Chalandrutsanos was to demonstrate. The boys were all in some sense dependents, but they differed markedly in their degree of femininity. Eustathios Georgiou, according to Byron’s own account, was strikingly effeminate. John Edlestone was shy, passive, and affectionate. Nicolo Giraud, on the other hand, seems to have been capable and energetic, and Lukas Chalandrutsanos was what we would today call a “freedom fighter.” Youth and good looks seem to have attracted Byron whether they took on a boyish or girlish cast.

How did Byron’s feelings for boys relate to his feelings for women? People unfamiliar with bisexuality are often baffled by the implied contradiction, assuming that exclusivity is the human norm. But Kinsey’s survey of 1948 revealed that almost half of the 5,000 men interviewed admitted to some erotic feeling for both sexes. In other times and cultures the figures might have been higher. Ancient Greeks and Romans, medieval Arabs, Persians and Japanese, for instance, all took male bisexuality for granted, chiefly in its pederastic form. Of course not all bisexuality falls into a single pattern. Some Casanovas much involved with women occasionally seek passive men, some domi-
nant male partners. Some androgynous men seem drawn to men or women more on the basis of personality than of gender. Among pederasts, some marry and have only fleeting affairs with boys; others enter into serious emotional involvements and assume educational or parental responsibility for their young lovers.

Homosexuals such as Walt Whitman, John Addington Symonds, and Edward Carpenter, who have celebrated the "love of comrades" (i.e., who have been attracted to adult males), have frequently had strong feminist sympathies, perceiving in male supremacism a form of oppression directed against both women and gay men. But writers whose homosexual feelings have taken a pederastic form, such as Stefan George and Thomas Mann, have generally favored the ancient Greeks, preferred aristocracy to democracy and hierarchies to egalitarianism. On the sexual side, Byron's politics were those of this second group. Byron had an abiding hatred of political tyranny, but, like many liberals, he was not wholly consistent: he championed oppressed schoolboys, exploited workers, and oppressed minorities such as Irish Catholics and the Greeks under Turkish rule, and on occasion he chivalrously defended individual women, but not women as a class. The ingrained sense of superiority that led him to admire Washington but flinch at the idea of living in the United States (he preferred semifeudal Venezuela when he considered emigrating) and to ridicule Hobhouse's association with lower-class radicals carried over to his relations with the other sex. Intellectual women like Mary Shelley were not welcome at his literary evenings in Pisa, and Madame de Staël ceased to be the butt of ridicule only when she bravely led the pro-Byron faction in Switzerland. He went so far as to prefer ancient and Eastern to modern Western

1. But not all pederasts have been antifeminists, e.g., the German anarchist John Henry Mackay (1866–1933) is strongly feminist in his novels and essays.
manners. His Ravenna journal of January 6, 1821, contains a sardonic paragraph that strikingly reveals his prejudices:

Thought of the state of women under the ancient Greeks—convenient enough. Present state, a remnant of the barbarism of the chivalric and feudal ages—artificial and unnatural. They ought to mind home—and be well fed and clothed—but not mixed in society. Well educated, too, in religion—but to read neither poetry nor politics—nothing but books of piety and cookery. Music—drawing—dancing—also a little gardening and ploughing now and then. I have seen them mending the roads in Epirus with good success. Why not, as well as hay-making and milking?

The supercilious tone may tempt the modern reader to dismiss Byron's jottings as playful exuberance. But Schopenhauer quoted the paragraph with approbation in his notorious essay "On Women," the locus classicus of nineteenth-century misogyny. Nietzsche in turn adopted Schopenhauer's political view in Beyond Good and Evil, and the Nazis neatly condensed this reactionary program into three words—Kinder, Kirche, Küche. Some of Byron's oft-reiterated admiration for Catholicism undoubtedly had a cynical side to it; like Nietzsche, he favored female piety as encouraging female submissiveness.

Byron, for his part, felt he had been much abused by women. He blamed his club foot (bitterly, if unfairly) on what he thought was his mother's prudery in rejecting medical attendance at his birth. At nine, he had been seduced by his nurse. When he was sixteen, Mary Chaworth, whom he adored, dismissed him from consideration for his lameness. The first women with whom he had extensive experience were prostitutes whom he paid for sex, often poor women among whom venality was likely to run high. His first serious affair was with the eccentric and histrionic Lady Caroline Lamb. We can see why Byron regarded himself as a victim. Yet his antifeminism, like many

2. BLJ, 8:15.
prejudices, would probably have existed independently of his unfortunate experiences. It was partly a fashionable posture among cynical radicals of his age, partly an expression of the domineering side of his temperament. 3

But the political stances of men and women rarely throw light on their personal relationships, especially in matters of sex. There sentiment and desire usually prevail over politics. Byron’s movement back and forth between the heterosexual and homosexual poles of his being was sometimes reactive—as when he turned to John Edleston after his rejection by Mary Chaworth—and sometimes the inexplicable result of mood and fancy—as when he thought the boys at the convent promised “better entertainment” than the Macri sisters. But even when he was most intent on seeking homosexual adventures, he could be deflected, as by Constance Spencer Smith at Malta. The attraction of women was strong even when his interest in boys was paramount.

After Byron left England in 1816, this passion for women seems to have predominated for the next seven years. We hear almost nothing of same-sex liaisons. But he was far from chaste. John Polidori, the young Italian doctor who accompanied him, reported that Byron, on arriving in Belgium, fell upon the chambermaid “like a thunderbolt,” as if he were throwing off the constraints of marriage and

3. An adequate treatment of Byron’s views on women would require a book or at least a long article. I do not pretend to speak definitively here—only to give a suggestive sketch of the topic in relation to his bisexuality. Critics looking for pro-feminist passages in Byron’s writings most often cite Julia’s letter in Don Juan, Canto I, stanzas 192–97. This letter dramatizes the double standard that shut “fallen” women up in convents but allowed their lovers to travel and enjoy themselves. But I doubt if protest or reform was Byron’s purpose, poignantly as he renders Julia’s plight. The letter can be read simply as a literary exercise in the tradition of Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard” or Ovid’s Heroides. Rakes like Ovid could enjoy seducing women and at the same time find pleasure in the aesthetic contemplation of their agonies when they lost their lovers or felt betrayed, situations that underlined their pathetic helplessness. I don’t think any feminist sympathy is necessarily implied in such dramatizations.
England. This sexual urgency dominated the first year of his stay in Venice. Byron was to write to John Murray that he had been sexually active there with more than two hundred women of all classes, aristocratic and bourgeois, courtable and purchasable. Yet rumors of his bisexuality persisted in England. On January 20, 1817, two months after his arrival on the shores of the Adriatic, his sister communicated to his wife the startling theory that his affair with Marianna Segati, begun then, was a cover for a homosexual relation. Augusta’s speculations have recently been published by Malcolm Elwin:

It is ye 2nd letter which suggests to me to communicate to you, I think, for reasons—he thinks me still in ye dark, but suspects you may not be & wishes to blind you. In short it appears evident that he wishes such a communication [i.e., about the Segati affair] to be spread by the whole tenor of both letters. The other day, mon Mari [my husband] told me that he had heard from a person just returned from London that there were ye most horrible reports. I asked of course what, upon which he mention’d the “subject erased,” but added, qu’on disoit maintenant qu’il y avait deux choses [that they now say there were two affairs]—that & the “cover” you allude to. My ignorance is great on such subjects mais je croyais toujours que l’une etoit incompatible avec l’autre [but I believed always that the one was incompatible with the other]. However, it coincided with what I had heard from Mrs. Villiers] a few days before—of a letter from M-l-n mentioning the atrocious manner of proceeding there being such as to shock even dans ce pays la [in that country]—that the Establishment consisted of two Men & 2 Women."

Unknown to Byron, Augusta regularly sent his letters to his wife for her perusal. Her “reasons” for communicating this rumor—which she more than half-believed—were specific, if unrealistic. Augusta believed the Segati affair would prejudice Lady Byron against any future reconcil-

iation. By retailing the more lurid version, she was trying to revive the theory that Byron was indeed insane, a view Augusta clung to long after everyone else had abandoned it:

My dearest A, do you think it possible such a person can be free from insanity? On the one hand one hears that it is the only point on which he is afraid—"qui le fait trembler jusqu'au fond de l'âme" ["that makes him tremble to the depths of his soul"]. On the other, that it is displayed in this public & shameless way, not only now, but in a minor degree it must have been before. Such inconsistency surely can only be attributed to such a cause.  

Perhaps Augusta found balm in ascribing her brother's bisexuality to mental derangement. There is no other evidence of any homosexual intrigue at this time. The story seems to be only one of the exaggerated and inaccurate rumors circulating about Byron, on a par with another to the effect that Augusta had herself accompanied her brother to Switzerland disguised as a page.

Byron's own correspondence is now silent on the subject of homosexual involvements. This in itself does not necessarily mean that there were none. Hobhouse had no doubt lectured him into epistolatory discretion, and he himself had probably become warier about disclosures as a result of the separation imbroglio. But one account emanating from Venice deserves some consideration, especially as it comes from an eyewitness. Shelley had met Byron in Switzerland a year before and formed a warm, though sometimes troubled, friendship. But on December 22, 1818, he wrote to Thomas Love Peacock, expressing his dismay at Byron's Italian companions:

L[ord] B[yron] is familiar with the lowest sort of . . . women the people his gondolieri pick up in the streets. . . . He associ-
ates with wretches who seem almost to have lost the gait & physiognomy of man, & who do not scruple to avow practices which are not only not named but I believe seldom ever conceived in England. He says he disapproves [sic], but he endures."

This letter has caused much speculation. The second sentence appears at first to refer back to the "women," but the reference to "wretches who seem almost to have lost the gait & physiognomy of man" suggests a circle of effeminate males whose mannerisms and make-up mimicked women. It has usually been taken to refer to a homosexual coterie. Were these men or transvestite street boys? Did Byron simply find them amusing company, or was he sexually involved? Unfortunately, we have no clues that will allow us to set Shelley's remarks in an intelligible context.

But though Byron does not tell us anything of a personal nature in his extant letters, he now felt free, for the first time, to make explicit references to homosexuality in his satiric poetry. Two years earlier, Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria*, had deplored the existence of Greek and Latin poems on homoerotic themes. "Blest indeed is that state of society," he wrote sanctimoniously, "in which no charm of diction or imagery could exempt the Bathyllus even of an Anacreon, or the Alexis of Virgil, from disgust and aversion!" A few days after his reunion with Shelley, Byron began the first canto of *Don Juan*, and in his catalogue of classical erotic poets, he deliberately mocked Coleridge's British prudery:

Ovid's a rake, as half his verses show him,
Anacreon's morals are a still worse sample,
Catullus scarcely has a decent poem,
I don't think Sappho's Ode a good example,

Although Longinus tells us there is no hymn
Where the sublime soars forth on wings more ample;
But Virgil's songs are pure, except that horrid one
Beginning with "Formosum pastor Corydon."

Clearly Byron is here in full reaction against contemporary English literary and social standards. By reiterating Longinus's praise of Sappho's ode in his essay "On the Sublime," Byron implies that same-sex love might itself aspire to nobility, a position strikingly at odds with the sour treatment of marriage elsewhere in the canto. Obviously, we are invited to take a different view from Coleridge's of the eclogue in which Corydon expresses his love for Alexis. Byron's deliberately provocative approach, of course, was more likely to exacerbate than mollify English prejudice. But it is the closest he comes anywhere in his writings to a public defense of homosexual love.

Though Byron tells us nothing in his Italian letters about his own association with homosexuals, he does comment on the way Italian society viewed such men. Like Hester Thrale half a century earlier, he is fascinated by the contrast between English and Italian mores. Writing to Hobhouse from Ravenna about Tommaso Sgricci, the famous improvisatore, he adopted a mockingly ironic tone quite different from the conventional indignation of English tourists:

Sgricci is here improvising away with great success—he is also a celebrated Sodomite, a character by no means so much respected in Italy as it should be; but they laugh instead of burning—and the Women talk of it as a pity in a man of talent—but with greater tolerance than could be expected—and only express their hopes that he may yet be converted to Adultery.—He is not known to have b——d anybody here as yet but has paid his addresses "fatto la corte" to two or three.

Sgricci was remarkable for extemporizing entire tragedies before theater audiences on such subjects as Charles I, Samson, and Idomeneo. He had a notable contemporary success, both literary and histrionic, in Rome, Milan, London, and Paris. Byron greatly admired his ability. But in referring to his reputation as a sodomite, Byron characteristically falls once more into the supercilious man-of-the-world tone he adopted in gossiping on such matters with Hobhouse.

The more relaxed atmosphere of Italy made it possible for Byron to look back on his own experiences philosophically. He now set to work on his memoirs, giving installments to Moore in October 1819 and November 1820. It is unlikely that he hinted in these at his bisexual interests: we shall discuss this question later. But, stimulated by this reminiscing, he wrote further comments on his early life in a journal begun at Ravenna in January. There appear his recollections of his friendship with Edward Noel Long and his “violent, though pure love” for John Edleston. Unfortunately, we know this journal only through Moore’s transcriptions, which break off at this point in a line of asterisks. We are luckier with respect to the jottings Byron began in October shortly before leaving Ravenna and then continued at Pisa under the heading “Detached Thoughts.” This manuscript, which did not pass into Moore’s expurgating hands, is the only important biographical fragment to reach us intact and uncensored. As such it is of major significance.

With number 72 of the “Detached Thoughts” there begins a series of notes of extreme interest with respect to Byron’s self-analysis, from which we have already quoted but which will bear quoting again, this time in full:

72

When I first went up to College—it was a new and heavy hearted scene for me. Firstly—I so much disliked leaving Harrow that though it was time—(I being seventeen) it broke my very rest for the last quarter—with counting the days that
remained.—I always hated Harrow till the last year and a half—but then I liked it.—2dly. I wished to go to Oxford and not to Cambridge.—3dly. I was so completely alone in this new world that it half broke my Spirits.—My companions were not unsocial but the contrary—lively—hospitable—of rank—& fortune—& gay far beyond my gaiety—I mingled with—and dined—and supped &c. with them—but I know not how—it was one of the deadliest and heaviest feelings of my life to feel that I was no longer a boy.—From that moment I began to grow old in my own esteem—and in my esteem age is not estimable.—I took my gradations in the vices—with great promptitude—but they were not to my taste—for my early passions though violent in the extreme—were concentrated—and hated division or spreading abroad.—I could have left or lost the world with or for that which I loved—but though my temperament was naturally burning I could not share in the common place libertinism of the place and time—without disgust.—And yet this very disgust and my heart thrown back upon itself—threw me into excesses perhaps more fatal than those from which I shrank—as fixing upon one (at a time) the passions which if spread amongst many would have hurt only myself."

Byron had sampled the women who entertained undergraduates at Cambridge and found these relations too sordid to attract him. His statement that he could have renounced the world for "that which I loved" reveals, through its telltale neuter pronoun, that he had another boy in mind. There seems to be some hint of blame in the last comment. Who was hurt? Perhaps he felt his affectionate tie with John Edleston had encouraged the boy in a homosexual direction and led to his later difficulties.

In the next note (73) Byron alludes to the "Melancholy which runs through my writings" and the general wonderment it had aroused. Then he goes on:

If I could explain at length the real causes which have contributed to this perhaps natural temperament of mine—this Melancholy which hath made me a bye-word—nobody would

wonder—but this is impossible without doing much mischief. I do not know what other men’s lives have been—but I cannot conceive of anything more strange than some of the earlier parts of mine—I have written my memoirs—but omitted all the really consequential & important parts—from deference to the dead—to the living—and to those who must be both. . . .

76

I must not go on with these reflections—or I shall be letting out some secret or other—to paralyze posterity."

What is most interesting here is Byron’s hint that his bisexuality, along with a hereditary predisposition, was the chief cause of the notorious “Byronic” temperament that so struck his contemporaries. Some readers, of course, have discounted Byron’s gloomy heroes as merely a fashionable literary pose, pointing out how common the type was in fiction before Byron gave it his name. But despite the wit and high spirits of his letters, conversation, and later satirical poetry, Byron’s self-communings reveal, I think, that the gloomy Byron was as real as the sparkling one. If Byron drew on such literary stereotypes as the protagonist of John Moore’s novel Zelucio and other esprits maudits from Gothic fiction, he did so because he found in them a significant part of himself. Some sexually active men have found their erotic vitality a source of joy to themselves and others. But behind his debonair worldly mask, Byron carried a heavy burden of guilt. There is evidence that he felt guilty about his harlotry after leaving Cambridge, about his incest with his sister, and about his subsequent marriage to a “pure” woman of whom he was unworthy. But of all his occasions of guilt, his homosexual inclinations must have tortured him most. Given the attitudes of his day, it is not surprising that he singles out his bisexuality as a significant element in the “Byronic” personality.

In these notes, Byron’s sense of detachment from his

11. Ibid., p. 38.
early life is striking. He seems almost to look at his former self as another person. Yet though he speaks of his schoolboy feelings as remote and strange, he was to experience an amazing resurgence of one particular male attachment very shortly after writing these lines. In note 91 he returned to the subject with a new confession:

My School friendships were to the passions (for I was always violent) but I do not know there is one which has endured (to be sure some have been cut short by death) till now—that with Lord Clare began one of the earliest and lasted longest—being only interrupted by distance—that I know of. I never hear the word "Clare" without a beating of the heart—even now, & I write it with the feelings of 1803—4—5—ad infinitum. 12

A week or so later, Byron left Ravenna for Pisa where he arrived on November 1. On the road from Bologna to Imola a strange coincidence befell him: he met Clare for the first time in seven or eight years. He recorded the experience in the first note (113) added to his "Thoughts" in the new city:

This meeting annihilated for a moment all the years between the present time and the days of Harrow—It was a new and inexplicable feeling like rising from the grave to me.—Clare too was much agitated—more—in appearance—than even myself—for I could feel his heart beat to the fingers' ends—unless indeed—it was the pulse of my own which made me think so. . . . We were but five minutes together—and in the public road—but I hardly recollect an hour of my existence which could be weighed against them. . . . Of all I have ever known—he has always been the least altered in every thing from the excellent qualities and kind affections which attracted me to him so strongly at School.—I should hardly have thought it possible for Society—for the World as it is called) to leave a being with so little of the leaven of bad passions.—I do not speak from personal experience only—but from all I have heard of him from others during absence and distance. 13

Later Byron told Thomas Moore that Clare visited him briefly at Leehorn in June: "As I have always loved him

12. Ibid., p. 44. Byron had, in fact, met Clare in 1803.
13. Ibid., pp. 49–50.
(since I was thirteen, at Harrow) better than any (male) thing in the world, I need hardly say what a melancholy pleasure it was to see him for a day only. 14 For Byron, boyhood was the age of kindness and affection, unspoiled by selfish interests. The reunion with Clare reawakened this idealism, so at odds with the cynicism of his mature existence. His feeling for the younger peer seems to have been the kind of "romantic friendship" he had earlier mentioned as characterizing his relation with Edward Noel Long, distinct from the love he felt for other young males, like John Edleston. What startled Byron—and surprises the reader—is the intensity of the emotion he felt himself gripped by, which seems to have existed separately from any homoerotic impulse. Indeed, such impulses now seem to have lain dormant until three years later when he made his second journey to Greece.