

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

1

ANNO XXVII 2019

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## MRS FELIX LORRAINE AND LADY CAROLINE LAMB: BYRONIC LORE IN *VIVIAN GREY*, PART I

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Like many of his contemporaries, the young Disraeli was a Byromaniac, and his relationship with John Murray provided him with private information regarding the charismatic poet and those who had been acquainted with him. This essay focuses on the largely unexplored connection between the fictional Mrs Felix Lorraine and Lady Caroline Lamb in *Vivian Grey*, Part I. While highlighting a number of 'Carolinish' attributes and echoes, it tries to account for the relevance of Mrs Felix in the novel.

*Keywords:* Benjamin Disraeli, Lady Caroline Lamb, *Vivian Grey*, Byromania, *roman à clef*.

Though the young Benjamin Disraeli figures with some prominence in influential books devoted to the late Romantic-early Victorian transition<sup>1</sup>, and Byron is very frequently referred to by biographers and critics dealing with Disraeli's early years and, especially, with his Oriental Grand Tour (1830-31)<sup>2</sup>, the Byron-Disraeli connection has not been investigated systematically. As a consequence, in Disraeli's writings of the 1820s and 1830s there are Byronic elements (echoes, topoi, references) still waiting to be explored<sup>3</sup>. In this article I confine myself to *Vivian Grey*, Part I, Disraeli's first novel and notorious *succès de scandale* published in 1826. In the novel, Byron is reminisced about, and openly eulogizes as the lost leader (echoing the opening of *Don Juan* – "I want a hero" – the young men in

<sup>1</sup> See, especially, A. Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, CUP, Cambridge 1995, pp. 206-246; and R. Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature 1824-1840*, Palgrave, Houndmills, Basingstoke 2002, pp. 115-125.

<sup>2</sup> Biographically speaking, Disraeli's Byromania is most apparent in his travels: when in Switzerland, in 1826, he made a point of rowing on Lake Geneva with Maurice, Byron's own boatman; and in his Mediterranean Grand Tour he even visited impervious Albania in the footsteps of Byron. From the Orient Disraeli brought back to England Giovanni Battista (Tita) Falcieri, Byron's former gondolier and manservant. Falcieri would eventually be employed as valet by Disraeli's father Isaac, who too was – incidentally – a Byron fan. Disraeli's Byromania and its implications are especially highlighted by William Kuhn, *The Politics of Pleasure: A Portrait of Benjamin Disraeli*, Pocket Books, London 2007<sup>2</sup>. On Disraeli's Grand Tour, and its Byronic aspects, see also D. Sultana, *Benjamin Disraeli in Spain, Malta and Albania 1830-32*, Tamesis, London 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Critics who have dealt with the Disraeli-Byron connection have mainly focussed on *Venetia* (1837), a fanciful fictionalization of Byron's and Shelley's lives. M. King – E. Engel, *Victorian Novels before Victoria: British Fiction during the Reign of William IV 1830-37*, Macmillan, London/Basingstoke 1984, pp. 61-86, is especially helpful concerning Byron's influence on Disraeli in the 1830s.

the novel lament his demise and declare: “We want Byron”<sup>4</sup>). He is also mildly satirised through Lord Alhambra, who is believed to be a parody of Lord Porchester (himself one of Byron’s imitators), but at the same time functions as a fictional domesticated incarnation of Byron, given that he seems to be on friendly terms with Vivian’s father very much as Byron had been with Disraeli’s father Isaac<sup>5</sup>. Leaving aside these more obvious aspects, here I set out to underscore the (hitherto largely unacknowledged) Byronic constellation gravitating around the fictional character of Mrs Felix Lorraine, a German lady and a devious plotter who mars Vivian Grey’s hopes of a political career. In doing so, I also cast some light on the novel’s deployment of such an eccentric female *persona* as the negative double of its protagonist.

In approaching this subject, it must be recalled preliminarily that *Vivian Grey*, Part I was advertised as a sort of *Don Juan* in prose, that is, as the work (potentially the first of a series) by a member of the most exclusive social circles who – under cover of anonymity – was likely to provide gossipy information regarding the world of fashion and high politics<sup>6</sup>. The novel itself evokes Don Juan in a crucial passage, when the young protagonist – having narrowly escaped being poisoned by Mrs Felix Lorraine – indulges in some soul-searching questioning: on the uncanny similarity between himself and this “female fiend” (“The same wonderful knowledge of the human mind, the same sweetness of voice [...] And is it possible that I am like her?”) and on the legitimacy of his own manipulative skills (“Am I then an intellectual Don Juan reckless of human minds, as he was of human bodies – a spiritual libertine?”), finally to invoke the aid of “the craftiest of valets; a Leporello often tried, and never found wanting – my own good mind”<sup>7</sup>. It goes without saying that here Disraeli is drawing on the Mozart-da Ponte version of the story, Byron’s Don Juan being an affable youth, not at all a cynical libertine, and having no valet called Leporello. Still, the reference to the notorious serial seducer chimes well with the novel’s Byronic element, which lies not so much in the similarities between the two protagonists (though they are both young and have to do with wily and sexually rapacious ladies), but – as shrewdly advertised by the publisher – in the openness of Vivian’s adventures to one or more sequels.

*Vivian Grey* was eventually received, however, as a (despicable) *roman-à-clef* dealing with events connected with the launch of the Representative, the short-lived Tory newspaper published by John Murray (Byron’s publisher and a family friend of the d’Israelis) from January to July 1826. Though the young author strenuously denied he had ever intended to make the distinguished publisher an object of satire, early readers (John Murray included)

<sup>4</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, in *The Early Novels of Benjamin Disraeli*, vol. I, M. Sanders ed., Routledge, London and New York 2004, pp. 144-145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> “A very singular novel of the satirical kind is on the eve of publication, to be called ‘Vivian Grey.’ It is said to be a sort of Don Juan in prose, detailing the adventures of an ambitious, dashing, and talented young man of high life. [...] It has been whispered that it is the intention of the author to resume the history of his hero (after the manner of Lord Byron’s celebrated work) from time to time, to carry him into every scene of modern life, to make him intimately acquainted with every fashionable and political character of the day”. [Anon.], *Literary Report*, “New Monthly Magazine”, 19, April 1, 1826, p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, p. 108.

had little doubt that the protagonists of the political and personal machinations around the “Representative” were the originals of the main characters. Thus, among a large cast of major and minor celebrities who are deployed as actors or – often under amusing fictional names – mentioned during the many chatty conversations in the novel, critics have repeatedly identified Cleveland with John Gibson Lockhart, Stapylton Toad with John Wilson Croker, the half-witted (and much given to booze) Marquess of Carabas with John Murray, Horace Grey as Isaac D’Israeli, and the eponymous protagonist as Benjamin Disraeli himself. Indeed, the more we get to know about the history of the “Representative” the more we feel we recognise its protagonists and its events under the thin fictional disguise<sup>8</sup>. This is no surprise: much of what we know of Disraeli’s compositional strategies in his later novels confirms that he was apt to concoct his stories by parodying real-life people and very freely re-arranging factual details relating to events he knew directly or had read/heard about<sup>9</sup>.

Mrs Felix Lorraine, Carabas’s German sister-in-law who befriends Vivian, but wrecks his plans, and whom he ultimately kills just using ‘words’ that are apt to snap her overstrung nerves, seems to be the main exception to the rule, because among the *litterati* and politicians belonging to Murray’s entourage there seems to have been no actively hostile woman who could have inspired such an extreme melodramatic character even vaguely. Two twentieth-century scholars have argued that Murray had a German sister-in-law – Mrs William Elliot, the wife of his wife’s brother – who might have been the original of this fictional foreign lady<sup>10</sup>. Evidence as to Mrs Elliot’s personality and doings is, however, hard to come by<sup>11</sup>: and chances are that, though she may well have provided Disraeli with his starting point, she ended up by serving as a peg onto which a number of fictional attributes – wholly unrelated to her – were hung. The few critics who have bothered to reflect

<sup>8</sup> The most recent and thorough attempt to investigate the history of the launch of the *Representative* and the reasons of its quick demise is R. Akel, *Benjamin Disraeli and John Murray: The Politician, the Publisher and the Representative*, Liverpool UP, Liverpool 2016, which draws upon most of the previous studies on the subject, but surprisingly does not include J. Ridley, *The Young Disraeli 1804-1846*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London 1995, which – in my opinion – remains the most persuasive in its overall approach.

<sup>9</sup> Disraeli’s penultimate novel, the phenomenally successful *Lothair* (1870) has proved an especially fruitful subject in the investigation of Disraeli’s pervasive use of topical actualities, as shown by M. Buschkühl, *Die Irische, Schottische und Römische Frage: Disraeli’s Schlüsselroman “Lothair” (1870)*, EOS Verlag, St. Ottilien 1980; L. Villa, *Con Lothair a Mentana: Benjamin Disraeli e la “questione romana”*, in Q. Marini – G. Sertoli – S. Verdino – L. Cavaglieri ed., *L’officina letteraria e culturale dell’età mazziniana (1815-1870)* Città del silenzio, Novi Ligure 2013, pp. 143-160 and again L. Villa, *Mr Phoebus e la sua isola*, in *Lothair di Benjamin Disraeli*, “Quaderni di Palazzo Serra”, 29, 2016, pp. 27-56.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Ridley, *The Young Disraeli*, p. 48; and W.E. Burton, *The Mask of Vivian Grey: An Examination of Benjamin Disraeli’s Vivian Grey*, MA Thesis (Kingston, Canada, 1976), p. 89. Ridley identifies the foreign lady as “Mrs William Eliot” but quotes no source for her assertion; Burton’s source is stated to be one (unspecified) manuscript letter Disraeli wrote to Sara Austen, where he allegedly refers to Murray’s German sister-in-law saying that she is “very helpful but an awful humbug”. Though nowadays Disraeli’s letters of the early years are (or should be) all in print, I have been unable to corroborate this piece of information.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Smiles’s biography of Murray – *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768-1843*, Murray, London 1891 – sheds no light on the subject.



on Mrs Lorraine have considered her as an intrusion of the Gothic mode into the silver-fork genre<sup>12</sup>, and – because of her sexual and political proclivities – have pronounced her as “atypical...in the fiction of the time”<sup>13</sup>. Only Schwarz seems to have been duly impressed with Disraeli’s choice to cast her quite explicitly as Vivian’s “dark parody”<sup>14</sup>.

Unlike such recent commentators, however, Disraeli’s early readers regarded Mrs Felix Lorraine as fairly typical of the popular fiction of the time (“a character of the circulating-library world”<sup>15</sup>); they assumed, moreover, that there was an original on which this character was based, and they identified it with Lady Caroline Lamb, the most notorious of Byron’s aristocratic lovers. The targeting of such an unfortunate female contemporary – the member of a very illustrious family and the separated wife of a prominent Whig politician to boot – was deprecated by reviewers, who were loth to mention her explicitly. “The Star Chamber”, the short-lived satirical journal supposedly master-minded by Benjamin Disraeli himself, in publishing the first (largely misleading) key to the novel, refused to enlighten its readers regarding Mrs Lorraine, disapproving “the spirit in which the author of Vivian Grey has celebrated in the pages of a novel, the sorrows or the crimes of any living female”<sup>16</sup>. But as early as July 1826, a very adverse reviewer in the “Literary Magnet” dubbed Mrs Lorraine “a pet lamb of the Leadenhall press”<sup>17</sup>: this seems punningly to suggest the original of Mrs Lorraine while at the same time associating both Lamb and the anonymous author of *Vivian Grey* with the (deplorable) Minerva Press representational style. The only other key that has survived, published by William Marsh in 1827 and including both a key to *Vivian Grey*, Part II, and the “Star Chamber” key to Part I, makes the connection with Caroline Lamb explicit<sup>18</sup>.

The assumption that Lorraine stood for Lamb was – it seems – but very rarely voiced in print; but it must have somehow persisted in the following decades, since at least one much later nineteenth-century commentator writing on Lamb asserts that she inspired Disraeli’s creation and points out the scene of Cleveland’s rejection of Mrs Lorraine in Book III, Ch. iii as having especially to do with Byron and Lady Caroline<sup>19</sup>. However, to the modern reader it is not immediately apparent why Disraeli’s fictional character should have been associated with Lamb: there is hardly any similarity in their lives and predicaments,

<sup>12</sup> M. King – E. Engel, *Victorian Novels before Victoria*, p. 63

<sup>13</sup> See R. O’Kell, *Disraeli: The Romance of Politics*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto/Buffalo/London 2013, p. 21: “That this characterization of a woman for whom sexual gratification and political power are overtly symbiotic, was not a subject of scandal can perhaps be explained by a combination of factors. She is clearly a foreigner [...] Disraeli extends her character beyond, or at least to, the limits of sanity”.

<sup>14</sup> D.R. Schwarz, *Disraeli’s Fiction*, Macmillan, London/Basingstoke 1979, p. 13. Schwarz praises Disraeli’s use of “Gothic melodrama” to explore “psychological complexity in a way that recalls Jacobean tragedy” (pp. 12-13).

<sup>15</sup> [Anon.], *Vivian Grey*, “The London Magazine”, 5, June 1826, p. 215.

<sup>16</sup> [Anon.], *A Key to Vivian Grey*, “The Star Chamber”, 4, May 24, 1826, 7, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> M.H., *Nuisances of the Press: The New Unknown*, “The Literary Magnet, or Monthly Journal of the Belles Lettres”, 1, July 1826, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> [Anon.], *Key to Vivian Grey*, Marsh, London 1827, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> See G. Barnett Smith, *Lady Caroline Lamb*, “The Gentleman’s Magazine”, 255, October 1883, pp. 341-342.

and it is only their psycho-pathological makeup that seems vaguely to suggest proximity between the two, Lady Caroline's disturbed personality and sexual intemperance being (one guesses) infused in Vivian's quasi-psychotic antagonist. Indeed, *prima facie* we may well sympathise with Robert Blake, Disraeli's most authoritative biographer, who gives this identification very short shrift ("Mrs Lorraine...is alleged without much basis to be a portrait of Lady Caroline Lamb"<sup>20</sup>). But British men of letters in the 1820s – especially those belonging to Murray's circle – were bound to see in the novel more than would meet posterity's eyes.

John Murray's own personal involvement with Lady Caroline Lamb must be especially underscored in this context. Though it is widely known that he found himself dragged into the long-distance skirmishing between the poet and his former lover, his role as recipient of Lady Caroline's confidences and consequently as a potential source of Byronic lore has been understudied. This is partly because Samuel Smiles' very Victorian biography – which remains the main published provider of information and epistolary evidence on Murray's side – pays little attention to his dealings with Lady Caroline<sup>21</sup>, and partly because the focus of investigation on the Byron-Lamb-Murray triangle has been, inevitably, the charismatic bard rather than the matter-of-fact publisher. What is generally known is that Lady Caroline befriended Byron's publisher after her split with the poet, arguably in an attempt to strengthen her connection with the latter, and subsequently in the hope that Murray would publish *Glenarvon* (1816), her *roman-à-clef* where, in a Gothic rendition of her passionate love affair with Byron, many of the related machinations by her relatives and friends were disclosed to the world. What is perhaps less known, though quite apparent from her published correspondence and her biography, is that over the years she gained a remarkable degree of intimacy with Murray – to the point that, through him, she had access to some of Byron's poems before they were actually published, and even was among the very few who were allowed to peruse Byron's Memoirs before their destruction<sup>22</sup>. There is ample evidence that – very much like Byron – Caroline was anything but discreet about her love affairs and emotional turmoils, and spread rumours about herself and Byron that soon acquired quasi-mythical status. This makes it very likely that such an intimate friend as Murray should be entrusted with bits and pieces of information that were bound eventually to trickle down from him to his entourage, and from his entourage to London literary and gossip society at large.

By autumn 1825-spring 1826 – when *Vivian Grey* was conceived and written – Byron was dead and gone, but Byromania was in full swing: the burning of his Memoirs in

<sup>20</sup> R. Blake, *Disraeli*, Faber, London (1966) 2010, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Smiles's *A Publisher and His Friends* mentions (and occasionally quotes) epistolary and business contacts between Murray and Lady Caroline Lamb (about Byron and about her novels), and also between Murray and her husband, and other members of the Whig élite, but does not dwell much on such topics.

<sup>22</sup> Only a selection of Caroline Lamb's letters has been published. See *The Whole Disgraceful Truth: Selected Letters of Lady Caroline Lamb*, P. Douglass ed., Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke 2006. It includes some letters addressed to Murray, and other letters where their frequent correspondence is referred to. Her familiarity with Murray is often noticed by P. Douglass, *Lady Caroline Lamb: A Biography*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York/Basingstoke 2004, who fails however to analyse its practical consequences.

Murray's own fireplace (on May 17, 1824) and the publication – later the same year – of Thomas Medwin's controversial *Conversations of Lord Byron* (with a section devoted to Byron's alleged recollections of his liaison with an unnamed but very recognisable lady “of the first connections”<sup>23</sup>) had certainly made Lady Caroline a recurrent topic in the conversations among the publisher and his associates. It is also useful to recall that in November 1825, when Disraeli was still very much involved in the preparations for the launch of the “Representative”, William Lamb had rented for his separated wife a very expensive house in Conduit Street, Mayfair, hardly ten minutes' walk from 50 Albemarle Street, Murray's headquarters and residence<sup>24</sup>. All of which makes it plausible that the fledgling novelist—who was, like his father and like many of his contemporaries, an admirer of Byron and an avid recipient of Byronic lore – might have read (or re-read) *Glenarvon* in 1824-1825<sup>25</sup>, besides having an ample store of suggestive anecdotes at his disposal while writing *Vivian Grey*.

The text of the novel provides significant support to this hypothesis. One crucial passage, in this respect, is the especially weird night scene set in the gallery of Château Désir (Book III, ch. IV). Here Mrs Lorraine reveals that, being obsessed with Vivian, she has indulged in atavistic rituals; he exhorts her to ‘calm [her]self’, and the frenzied lady replies:

“Calm myself! Oh! it is madness; very, very madness! ‘tis the madness of the fascinated bird; ...’tis the madness of the fawn, that gazes with adoration on the lurid glare of the anaconda's eye; ‘tis the madness of woman who flies to the arms of her – *Fate*”; and here she sprang like a tigress round Vivian's neck...<sup>26</sup>

This might have suggested to insiders more than a chance echo of Caroline Lamb's (alleged) diary annotation, in the early stages of her acquaintance with Byron, that “that beautiful pale face is my fate”<sup>27</sup>. All the more so since the whole passage appears to be a loose

<sup>23</sup> Th. Medwin, *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron: Noted during a Residence with His Lordship at Pisa, in the Years 1821-1822*, Colburn, London 1824, p. 212. The “conversation” on Lady Caroline was suppressed in the third edition of the book (and the following ones), possibly because of Lady Caroline's own passionate protestations in a long letter to the author (*The Whole Disgraceful Truth*, pp. 201-5), and also because Byron's alleged remarks on “the wretched female who had sacrificed to him her own and her husband's honour” had especially been censured by the “New Times” (n. 8188, October 26, 1824). Both the complete text of the first edition of the *Conversations* and the strictures of the *New Times* reviewer can be read on *Lord Byron and His Times* website, <http://www.lordbyron.org/monograph.php?doc=ThMedwi.1824&select=sec.38> (last accessed August 1, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Douglass, *Lady Caroline Lamb*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>25</sup> Though nowadays *Glenarvon* hardly strikes us as enticing reading for teenagers, Disraeli – who was born in December 1804 – might well have read it first soon after its publication. Bulwer, who was just one year older, apparently read it at school, when it ‘made a deeper impression than any romance I remember’. From an annotation in Bulwer's own copy of the novel, quoted in J. Clubbe, *Glenarvon Revised – and Revisited*, “The Wordsworth Circle”, 10, 1979, 2, p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> P. Douglass, *Lady Caroline Lamb*, p. 104. We have no diary of Caroline Lamb's to corroborate this sentence, nor any way to check whether it was actually known at the time. But, as stated above, there is ample evidence that Caroline herself divulged such autobiographic (or auto-fictional) details. See for instance the reports of

reworking (as if, vaguely, from memory) of one particular paragraph in *Glenarvon*, where the first impact of the poet's fictional avatar on the protagonist is described as follows:

Calantha was struck suddenly, forcibly struck; yet the impression made upon her was not in Glenarvon's favour. The eye of the rattle-snake, it has been said, once fixed upon its victim, overpowers it with terror and alarm: the bird thus charmed dares not attempt its escape; it sings its last sweet lay; flutters its little pinions in the air, then falls like a shot before its destroyer, unable to fly from its fascination<sup>28</sup>.

Disraeli's reprise of Lamb's implied simile might just be accidental, of course, were it not that the whole Gothic-melodramatic intrusion of the 'Long Gallery' chapter into the otherwise witty and satirically-inclined *Vivian Grey* rather strengthens the hypothesis that 'Lady Caroline' and her novel exerted a considerable imaginative pressure on the young author. Indeed, the reading of *Vivian Grey* side by side with *Glenarvon* might even suggest that bits and pieces of Lamb's visionary tale contributed to the shaping of Disraeli's story – from the use of cross-gender doubles, to the love-turned-to-hate relationship between the two arch-schemers and consummate seducers Lady Margaret and Glenarvon, down to (why not?) the echo of Glenarvon's Italian identity ('Viviani') in the name of Disraeli's eponymous hero. Whether these aspects impressed, or subliminally acted upon, the early readers of *Vivian Grey* is, of course, a matter of conjecture.

There is little doubt, however, that Mrs Lorraine's being presented as imbued in German folklore and superstitions arguably adds to the Lamb identification:

"Oh, I have lived in a land, where every mountain, and every stream, and every wood, and every ruin, has its legend, and its peculiar spirit; a land, in whose dark forests, the midnight hunter, with his spirit-shout, scares the slumber of the trembling serf; a land from whose winding rivers, the fair-headed Undine welcomes the belated traveller to her fond, and fatal, embrace..."<sup>29</sup>

This trait might reasonably have been taken for a fictional disguise of Lamb's Anglo-Irishness, and her familiarity with Irish folklore, such as is deployed – with an Irish setting, Irish legends and spooky atmospheres and the Ossianic rhetoric and diction – in her novel:

Bright shone the stars that night, and to the exalted imagination of the aged seer, it seemed in sleep, that the spirits of departed heroes and countrymen, freed from the bonds of mortality, were ascending in solemn grandeur before his eyes; – the song

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her conversations with, and letters to, Lady Morgan, as recorded in the latter's *Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries, Correspondences*, Allen, London 1863, II, pp. 188-213.

<sup>28</sup> C. Lamb, *Glenarvon* (1816), F. Wilson ed., Dent, London 1995, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, p. 115.

of the Banshees mourning for the sorrow of their country, broke upon the silence of the night...<sup>30</sup>

Most crucially, however, Disraeli's contemporaries might have been struck by the episode where Mrs Lorraine entertains Vivian with the story of Max Rodenstein and his portrait – a Gothic 'tale within the tale' included in Book III, Ch. iv, that was to provide Oscar Wilde with inspiration for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>31</sup>. It was well known among Murray's, Byron's and Lamb's acquaintances that the Byron-obsessed Caroline had once resorted to forgery to obtain Saunder's miniature portrait of the poet from the publisher, and had long haggled before returning it to Byron, who eventually let her have a copy<sup>32</sup>. This makes it more than a chance coincidence, then, that Mrs Lorraine should introduce her story by showing Vivian the "small miniature which was attached to a chain round her neck" and by her comment that, though that is "a fair work of art" if he "had but seen the prototype, [he] would have gazed on this as on a dim and washed-out drawing"<sup>33</sup>.

Last but not least, the winding up of Max Rodenstein's story – where Mrs Lorraine reveals that she herself was the lady who had witnessed the closing of the eyes of the portrait contemporaneously with the young man's actual death on the Leipzig battlefield – might be taken as a fictional reworking of the vivid nightmarish apparition of Byron which Lady Caroline had (allegedly) been the recipient of about the time the poet expired at Missolonghi. We have, of this episode, the account she gave to Thomas Medwin in a long letter she wrote to him after the publication of his *Conversations of Lord Byron* in November 1824:

In the middle of the night I fancied I saw L<sup>d</sup> Byron. I screamed jumped out of bed and desired them [a nurse and Mrs Russell Hunter who were taking care of her during an illness] to save me from him. He looked horrible and ground his teeth at me; he did not speak. His hair was straight; he was fatter than when I knew him, & not so handsome. I felt convinced I was to die. This dream took possession of my mind. I had not dreamed of him since we had parted. It was, besides, like no other dream except one of my mother that I ever had. I am glad to think it occurred before his death as I never did & hope I never shall see a ghost. I have even avoided enquiring

<sup>30</sup> This example, one of the many that could be given, is drawn from the opening page of Lady Caroline Lamb, *Glenarvon*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> The first to point out the connection between Dorian Gray and Max Rodenstein's portrait in *Vivian Grey* was Richard Aldington in his *Introduction to Oscar Wilde: Selected Works*, R. Aldington ed., Heinemann, London/New York 1946, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> The episode involved also Lady Melbourne, and has been widely discussed by critics. See especially J. Soderholm, *Fantasy, Forgery and the Byron Legend*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky. 1996, pp. 41-69; for a more recent and ample discussion of the Byron-Lamb relationship, see C. Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2015, pp. 19-43.

<sup>33</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, p. 104. Again, Lady Morgan's *Memoirs*, can be considered as an index of the wide publicity Lamb gave to her private affairs: her attachment to her copy of Byron's portrait by Saunders figures repeatedly in her letters to Lady Morgan (pp. 206, 209).

about the exact day for fear I should believe it – it made enough impression as it was. I told William, and my brother, & Murray at the time<sup>34</sup>.

Though we may question the authenticity of this “dream”, we have no reason to doubt that Murray was told about it at some point, given that we have evidence he had been promptly informed – in November 1821 – of a previous premonition (“omen”), which Lamb had had before the news of her mother’s death in Florence actually reached her<sup>35</sup>.

Extrasensory perception – or proneness to telepathic communication with the dying – was known, in short, to be part of Lamb’s disturbed psychological makeup, whence, given the context (the portrait, the death of a charismatic and very handsome young man...), Mrs Felix Lorraine’s similar propensity may well descend.

Disraeli was apt to embellish/idealize facts, while turning them into fiction (or autobiography), which may account for the disparity between the beautiful effigy of young Rodenstein uncannily recording his passing away (“again the eyelids trembled, there was a melancholy smile, and then they closed”)<sup>36</sup>, and Lord Byron “look[ing] horrible” and “gr[inding] his teeth” at his former lover. To be sure, a description of a fatter, gaudily dressed and definitely “not so handsome” Byron is included in *Vivian Grey*, Part I:

“Yes, his face was very much swollen, and he was getting fat. His hair was grey, and his countenance had lost that spiritual expression which it once so eminently possessed. His teeth were decaying... He had on a magnificent foreign foraging cap... and a frogged sourtout; and he had a large gold chain round his neck, and pushed into his waistcoat pocket.”<sup>37</sup>

But we know for sure this came straight from a conversation that Isaac d’Israeli and his teen-age son had with Tom Moore – after he had met Byron in Italy – during a cosy dinner party at Murray’s on November 27, 1822: “His facing has swelled out and he is getting fat. His hair is gray and his countenance has lost that ‘spiritual expression’ which he so eminently had. His teeth are getting bad...”<sup>38</sup>. We can assume that Moore’s oral report – which the young Byron fan religiously noted down and later used in his novel – was repeated in more than one context and inevitably circulated; indeed, it might well be the stuff out of which Caroline’s premonitory dream was woven.

<sup>34</sup> *The Whole Disgraceful Truth*, p. 205.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>36</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, p. 105.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>38</sup> The quotation is from Disraeli’s own notes, which meticulously record the conversation, published in W.F. Monypenny, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield. Vol. 1: 1804-1837*, Macmillan, London 1910, p. 37. Lucien Wolf, *Introduction*, in Benjamin Disraeli, *Vivian Grey, Volume I*, Alexander Moring/De la More Press, London 1904, pp. xxxv-xxxvi, wrongly assumed that Disraeli’s source for this might be Byron’s cousin, Robert Wilmot-Horton, apparently one of the two intimates who took it upon themselves to burn Byron’s memoirs. Wolf also opined that he might be the source of “perhaps a hint or two about Lady Caroline Lamb” – which may well have been the case.

One is bound to wonder, in pondering on the role of Mrs Lorraine in the novel, why on earth the young Disraeli should have chosen to deploy a woman as Vivian's double, or should have happened, perhaps subconsciously, to create a character that resonated so intensely with Lady Caroline Lamb. In this respect, it is useful to highlight one further aspect of Lamb's psychological profile and literary production that appears relevant to Disraeli's novel. Lamb had anonymously published clever burlesque parodies of Byron (*A New Canto*, 1819, *Gordon: A Tale*, 1821), where her ability to mimic Byron's style and discursive attitudes was much in evidence. A comparable ability to "improvise quotations"<sup>39</sup> in the manner of illustrious writers figures conspicuously in the novel. This skill, together with the cognate facility for forging literary celebrities' "autographs"<sup>40</sup>, is not associated with Mrs Lorraine, however, but with the eponymous hero of the story, who "could unpremeditatedly clothe his conceptions in language characteristic of the style of any particular author"<sup>41</sup>, be it the epistolary style of a friend, the prose of an illustrious politician or verses by an orientalisng fashionable poet which might just as well have been written by (or attributed to) Byron himself:

"Lord Alhambra! I will take a glass of Johannisberg with you, if the Marquess's wines are in the state they *should* be:  
The Crescent warriors sipped their sherbet spiced,  
For Christian men the various wines were *iced*.  
I always think that those are two of the most admirable lines in your Lordship's poem," said Vivian.  
His Lordship did not exactly remember them: it would have been a wonder if he had...<sup>42</sup>

In the novel, such a skill is part and parcel of Vivian's ability to understand people, to guess their desires and weaknesses, and consequently to tell them what they will be pleased to hear, flattering and manipulating them to achieve his own ends. Vivian even theorises it as a sort of political philosophy: in order to rule men, you must know them, empathise with their passions and vanities, imaginatively share in their disappointments and aspirations, no matter how petty you may judge them. This is, precisely, what makes him an 'intellectual Don Juan', a serial seducer who is not so much interested in sex, as in wielding power over men. As such, he is phenomenally successful, until Mrs Lorraine, who is as intuitive, manipulative and hypocritical as he is, eventually beats him at his own game.

The writing of *Vivian Grey* is generally associated with Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine, or The Man of Refinement*. The novel was published anonymously by Colburn in the spring of 1825, and its spectacular success – accompanied by speculations as to the identity

<sup>39</sup> B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, Part I, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70. Compare Vivian's extemporaneous couplet, for instance, with *Don Juan*, Canto II, Stanza 153: "To stir her viands, made him quite awake / And long for food, but chiefly a beef-steak". I quote from T.G. Steffan – E. Steffan – W.W. Pratt's edition (Penguin, London 2004).

of the “Great Unknown” – made the (heavily indebted) young Disraeli try his hand at this type of fiction, and offer it to the same publisher<sup>43</sup>. Judging from the considerable presence of ‘Carolinish’ attributes in *Vivian Grey*, Part I, however, one is tempted to surmise that – while perhaps, on the one hand, identifying with fashionable upper-class male authors such as Ward, or even Byron – Disraeli sensed, on the other hand, he was treading the same ground as the resentful Lady Caroline Lamb had trodden when writing *Glenarvon*, which – originally offered to Murray – had been published anonymously by Colburn ten years before.

It is well known that the *roman-à-clef* – as a fictional subgenre – was traditionally labelled as ‘feminine’, and consequently despised. To settle one’s own accounts by satirizing former friends under cover of anonymity was emphatically un-gentlemanly: “to draw caricatures of our contemporaries – Disraeli himself would concur – is not a very difficult task: it requires only a small portion of talent, and a great want of courtesy”<sup>44</sup>; while malicious gossip implied a breach of confidence, and was judged, much rather, the weapon of social inferiors, especially if gendered female. This is precisely what at least one very adverse critic of Disraeli’s novel opined. In dwelling on Mrs Lorraine’s graphically depicted death – the bursting of a blood vessel deliberately brought about by Vivian’s adroit use of words to strain and exacerbate her proneness to nervous excess – the “London Magazine” reviewer argued that

Novellists [sic] are free to make their heroes as villainous as they please; but we rarely meet with authors who delight in making them dastardly, and attributing to them the paltry malice of rival Abigails. ... This single feature has almost convinced us, that the book is not the work of any of the Messieurs named. It must be the production of a talented Abigail, whose natural weapon of offence is her tongue, and whose imagined warfare with one of *the sex*, is not mitigated by those forbearances which men use towards women<sup>45</sup>.

All of which might provide a clue as to why a mysterious foreign lady should serve as the (intensely autobiographical) protagonist’s dark parody in *Vivian Grey*.

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<sup>43</sup> Ward was a retired politician, whose house in Buckinghamshire Isaac d’Israeli had happened to rent for the summer-autumn 1825. Ward and Isaac had met through Benjamin Austen, Ward’s solicitor, and the d’Israelis were among the very few who knew Ward was the author of *Tremaine*. Biographers agree that Disraeli’s personal contact with Sara Austen, who had acted as an intermediary between Ward and Colburn, and was willing to serve Disraeli in the same capacity, was crucial in bringing about the publication of *Vivian Grey*. By the end of 1825, Benjamin found himself heavily indebted as a consequence of his rash financial speculations, which made the opportunity of anonymously reaching Colburn via Austen especially attractive.

<sup>44</sup> B. Disraeli, *The Young Duke*, Alexander Moring/De la More Press, London (1831) 1905, advertisement.

<sup>45</sup> *Vivian Grey*, “London Magazine”, 5 June 1826, p. 216.







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