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An Unpublished Letter of Lord Byron to Lady Caroline Lamb

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An Unpublished Letter from Lord Byron to Lady Caroline Lamb

In the period from March to August, 1812, Lady Caroline Lamb and Lord Byron exchanged perhaps 200 to 300 letters, almost all of which have been lost. Lamb quoted some letters she received in her novel, *Glenarvon* (1816), and one of these was authenticated by Leslie Marchand for his edition of Byron's letters and journals.¹ Lamb also quotes passages from letters of Byron to her in some of her correspondence, and in one letter to Lady Melbourne dated from Bath, 24 March 1813, she transcribed an entire Byron letter.

The letter to Lady Melbourne which includes the Byron letter is in the Lamb Papers in the British Library.² In it Caroline explains that the Byron letter was dated by him 14 August 1812, a date two weeks after she had run away and been fetched back to her family by him (31 July to 1 August 1812), and not long before her mother and father took her to Ireland (they left London on 23 August 1812) to stop her love affair with Byron. She tells Lady Melbourne that she had subsequently copied out this same letter and sent it to Byron, to remind him she had 'some little reason to be surprised at his conduct'. By 'his conduct' she meant his dropping her in fall 1812 and his selection of Lady Oxford as his paramour.

In March 1813, when Caroline sent Lady Melbourne the transcript of the letter (incorporated into her own message), she was responding to a request Lady Melbourne made on Byron's behalf that Caroline return a picture of him and his letters. The picture had been obtained by Caroline from John Murray without Byron's knowledge. Caroline had also requested a cutting of Byron's hair, and Lady Melbourne was involved in that negotiation. In the letter of 24 March 1813, in which the Byron letter is included, Caroline writes, 'You say he promised you the hair this is all I wish'. In another letter dated 25 March 1813 and addressed to Lord Byron, Lady Melbourne presses him to supply the hair and not cavil: '[R]eally by yr reluctance to have yr Hair touched or to part with any of it, —I am tempted to think there is some particular charm attached to it'.³ Caroline transcribes the letter to prove to her mother-in-law that Byron once promised her his enduring love and a picture of himself, whereas now he is demanding his picture back and writes and in 'levity' with 'Jokes about lovers perjuries'.

The letter is introduced with this preamble: 'I sent him [Byron] the Copy of a paper signed the 14th of August I never saw him since or for a fortnight before—it was if you recollect after my Mothers illness a good while—and just before we went to Ireland—it says' [the transcription follows immediately]:

Caroline

I engage by all that is sacred whatever may occur whether I may be forced by others to give you up or to form any new engagement — I will abide by this so help me Allah & your God — your Gifts I will consider as sacred & either restore them to you — or return them myself no other shall ever possess — your picture I will never part with — mine I freely gave you & you shall ever keep it with my will & consent — if induced to marry or to like any other which I do not believe credible — I do engage to write & consult you first & fairly to tell you the change in my thoughts & affections — in every instance your feelings shall be solely considered by me & through life you may depend on me as being not only your lover but your most devoted & attached friend

— I do not write this during the violence of passion or from any possible motive but the true feeling of a heart solely yours & it is my belief unalterably yours I ask but a few things in return but even should you be prevailed upon to act differently you may depend on me — I shall have a melancholy pride in fulfilling your desires though you may forget mine —
yours Byron

After this transcription, Caroline comments, ‘I sent this to him merely to shew him that I had some little reason to be surprised at his conduct he answers with a thousand Jokes about Lovers perjuries & says he concludes by my still dwelling on past occurrences that I have not found any new connection ?! — so much for his letter today, but not one word respecting what I asked about the Picture [. . .]’

Because Lamb is the source of another Byron letter, and because in this case she was quoting in full a letter by Byron to her mother-in-law, whom she knew to be intimate with Byron, and who therefore could detect a forgery, this letter must be assumed to be an authentic transcription.

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¹ Leslie Marchand, *Byron's Letters and Journals* 12 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973-1995), 2:185.

² Lamb Papers, British Library, Add. MS 45546, folios 65-67.

³ Elizabeth Milbanke Lamb, Viscountess Melbourne, *Byron's "Corbeau Blanc": The Life and Letters of Lady Melbourne*, ed. Jonathan David Gross (Houston: Rice University Press, 1997), 140.