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Byron, The Complete Poetical Works

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Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works. Volume One, ed. Jerome J. McGann. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. xlviii, 465 pp. \$98.00. Paper — \$59.00.

This first volume of the new edition of Byron's verse is unassuming in size and external appearance. Almost nothing else about the book is so modest — certainly not the scholarship of the editor. Jerome J. McGann's work on this project is impressive. If Volume One (which covers Byron's poetry from 1798 through 1811) indicates fairly what we can expect from successive numbers in the series, then when *The Complete Poetical Works* is finally finished, scholars will have ready to hand a wealth of information and poetry, systematically organized and edited. This edition marks a significant contribution to Byron studies — in its own right and in what it makes possible for other scholars. It is a worthy companion to the new edition of *Byron's Letters and Journals*, recently edited by Leslie A. Marchand.

To improve upon other complete collections of Byron's poetry, McGann has gone to great lengths to establish definitive texts for all the poems in the Byron canon. As he points out in his "Editorial Introduction," every other collected edition — including the Oxford Standard Authors edition, edited by Frederick Page (1904) and revised by John Jump (1970); the Cambridge Edition (Houghton Mifflin), edited by Paul E. More (1905) and revised by Robert Gleckner (1975); and even the standard edition in seven volumes, edited by E. H. Coleridge (1898-1904) — is inadequate, either because it is incomplete or because the texts on which it is based were corrupt. To establish reliable and accurate texts, McGann has collated no fewer than sixteen different collected editions of Byron's poems, other "early editions" of separately printed works when they were authorized by the poet, manuscripts, copy texts, and letters. In his commentaries on each poem, McGann gives a brief account of extant manuscripts, the date of the work, and its publishing history. His guiding principles for determining a correct text are accuracy of the copy text, "textual relevance," and strict fidelity to *Byron's* intent wherever it can be discovered. This last is no small consideration because even some of the best of Byron's other editors have seen fit to omit parts of poems that Byron at one time wanted to publish. McGann's procedures have led him "to alter the received texts of a large number of poems." Moreover, McGann has done much to correct the canon itself. Volume

One alone, for example, contains more than thirty new poems which have not appeared in any previous standard collected edition. A comprehensive and reliable edition such as this is certainly welcome. The paper is sturdy; the type is large and readable; and, in spite of its five hundred plus total pages, the book is not at all cumbersome. In short, this is a volume that can be studied without discomfort. It is an edition that was apparently conceived and composed with the interests of the "serious scholar" in mind.

As far as quality and originality go, many of Byron's *juvenilia* (the poet's own term for them) do not bear up well under close scrutiny. They are sometimes avowedly imitative, sometimes pompous, often sentimental, and frequently just adolescent. As a result, up until now the "serious scholar" may have been the only one with any interest in most of the poems in this volume. McGann's edition will likely rescue many of these poems from the neglect they have suffered, because this editor has given us a more complete picture of the young poet than we have ever had. Byron's first volume of verse, *Fugitive Pieces*, was privately printed, and it brought him sharp criticism when the erotic frankness of a few poems offended some readers. In deference to friendly advice, Byron tried to have all the copies of the little book destroyed, and he issued a revised, "miraculously chaste" second edition called *Poems on Various Occasions*. In it Byron deleted select stanzas from one or two poems (such as "To the Sighing Strephon") and omitted entirely the poem that caused him the most trouble, "To Mary." Sadly, some of what Byron suppressed for the sake of chastity makes the most interesting reading. McGann restores these texts to their original forms and is the first editor to include "To Mary" in a collected edition (it does not even appear in Coleridge's). Along with the several new poems, these restorations make possible a more accurate and comprehensive reassessment of this period in Byron's career and its relation to his later works.

For all the book's important accomplishments, there are a few inconveniences. His system of chronological ordering causes some minor problems; for example, McGann puts all the poems related to the publishing of *Hours of Idleness* (1807) together in 1806 (the date of *Fugitive Pieces*), even though some poems were written perhaps as early as 1802 and others not until as late as 1808. The editorial apparatus, especially the form of the textual notes, is complicated enough to warrant a substantial explanation in the "Editorial Introduction." McGann is by necessity obliged to use many short titles, but the short

title list at the beginning of the volume is incomplete; consequently, it may take a little searching to find the full title for which the abbreviation substitutes. Still, these are only inconveniences, and someone using the volume regularly will not long be annoyed by them.

More seriously, the commentaries on the poetry have not been edited as meticulously as the poems themselves. McGann's notes are plentiful (over one hundred pages to accompany three-hundred-fifty pages of poems) and generally very useful on textual matters and publication; but his manner of cross-referencing is sometimes bothersome. The omission of critical or interpretative comment is understandable (albeit unfortunate), but translations of the Greek and Latin epigraphs would be helpful additions to the notes. Finally, some errors just seem to have escaped his attention; no reader, for example, should try to reconstruct the contents of *Fugitive Pieces* or *Hours of Idleness* from the list of poems that McGann gives. This inconsistency in McGann's work is most troublesome. Although the texts of the poems are definitive, the volume must be used with care. In the end, the book may not be very well suited to the casual or occasional reader of Byron's poetry, the sort who wants to use the edition as a quick reference source for information about a particular poem.

In spite of these weaknesses, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, Volume One, is a major piece of scholarship, for which many of us are — and will long continue to be — very thankful. There is one other regrettable "inconvenience" about the work. For such an ordinary-looking book, it carries an extraordinary price. Although libraries will (or should) certainly purchase this edition, the cost may keep it out of many personal collections. That is a pity: it is one thing for an edition to be designed primarily for the "serious scholar"; it is quite another when only the affluent can afford to be "serious."

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