Byron and Nineteenth-Century Literary Philhellenism in America

Maria Schoina
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1 In April 1826, The New York Mirror, and Ladies' Literary Gazette published a poem titled “Invocation to Greece,” signed by a poet with the pen name “Jean.” The invocation is a typical example of American philhellenic verse of the time suggested by recollections of Greece’s ancient glory and inspired by the enthusiasm awakened by her recent heroic struggles. The poem ends not in the typical spirit of a rousing song but on the moving funereal image of the English poet whose name became synonymous with the country that fought for its freedom: George Gordon, Lord Byron.

   Hail! land sublime—array’d in classic robe,
   Mankind thy pupil, and thy school the globe,
   Throngs taught, by thee, in trembling ardour wait
   Thy dauntless struggle with disastrous fate.
   Yet one there was, who not with passive song
   Beheld thy conflict, or bemoan’d thy wrong,
   Bold to thine aid the lyre, and sword he brought,
   And double arm’d, thy front of peril sought
   Rear’d thy red banner o’er the Aegean wave,
   Unseal’d his coffers, and his spirit gave,
   Cold rests his heart within thy hallow’d bowers,
   And Helle’s maidens wreath its shrine with flowers.

2 The influence of Byron as a poet and as a man of action on the American poets of the early nineteenth century has been noted by many scholars, including William Ellery Leonard and David Roessel. Byron inspired a host of American imitators, prompting the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to remark (with a hint of irony) in 1829, “every village had its little Byron, its self-tormenting scoffer at morality, its gloomy misanthropist in song” (qtd. in Leonard 20). The publishing history of Byron’s works in America evinces his great popularity. During the early part of the nineteenth century, “three thousand copies of Byron’s poems were sold annually in this country” (Raizis and Papas, American Poets 13). A brief investigation of the magazines and literary
corners of newspapers of the time reveals Byron’s name in book reviews, book sellers’ notices, in various poems addressed to his lordship, in extracts from his works and direct imitations. On his part, Byron was flattered and satisfied to hear that his reputation had reached across the Atlantic. As he noted meaningfully in his journal entry for 5 December 1813,

Dallas’s nephew (son to the American Attorney-general) is arrived in this country, and tells Dallas that my rhymes are very popular in the United States. These are the first tidings that have ever sounded like Fame to my ears—to be redde on the banks of Ohio!... To be popular in a rising and far country has a kind of posthumous feel, very different from the ephemeral éclât and fête-ing, buzzing and party-ing compliments of the well-dressed multitude. (Byron’s Letters and Journals, III, 229-230)

The influence of Byron’s poetry and personality on the early nineteenth-century American poets in relation to their treatment of the Greek struggle was crucial. Byron’s commitment to the struggle for Greek freedom struck a strong emotional chord throughout Europe and America and increased the enthusiasm of the American poets for the Greek cause. His death in Missolonghi on 19 April 1824, especially as it was reported by those with him, turned the association of the poet and the place into a permanent bond that was quickly taken up into the romance of the Greek liberation. As David Roessel astutely claims, “in the eyes of the West, the poet created Greece twice—first when he put the Greece of Byron down on paper and later when he played a major role in the liberation of the country” (80). Indeed, Byron’s philhellenic verse and commitment to the cause of Greece appears to have been an especially great force in stimulating young American philhellenes to join the Greek fighting.

Byron as a source of inspiration inevitably found his way to American poets—supporters of the Greek cause, in particular, William Cullen Bryant, James Gates Percival, Fitz-Greene Halleck, James Gordon Brooks, George Hill, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, and numerous anonymous versifiers whose works we find in newspapers and literary periodicals of the time. Looking at the body of American poetry about the Greek Revolution, one can easily trace Byron’s evocative rhetoric about Greece. In this paper I want to discuss instances and echoes of such Byronic influence in American philhellenic verse written during and after the Greek Revolution and demonstrate the lingering presence of Byron’s Greece in the themes, images, feelings, language, and attitudes of the American poets. At the same time, I want to make a case for the creative interventions of some of Byron’s followers, their departure from the shadow of their great predecessor and articulation of a rich and spirited treatment of the Greek Revolution as well as for the refreshing diversity of poetic moods in dealing with the subject and experimentation with a canonical language. Adding new elements to their Byronism, the American poets express their philhellenic thoughts, feelings, and the historical realities surrounding them in a resonant manner.

Before I move on to the examination of the verse, I would like to address briefly the following question: How did Byron become the poet of Greece? And how did he make the Greek cause a European, and ultimately an American cause? When the young Lord Byron first set foot in Greece, at the end of September 1809, he was following a well-established tradition for well-to-do Englishmen. His fashionable Grand tour brought him to the Eastern Mediterranean in the company of his friend John Cam Hobhouse. Their travels between September 1809 and July 1810 through Epirus, Albania, Acarnania, the Morea, Attica, on to Smyrna in Asia Minor, culminating on the shores of
the Hellespont and the Ottoman capital Istanbul, were minutely described in Hobhouse's massive 1,154 page travel account, *A Journey through Albania, and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia* (1813). Byron remained in Greece (Athens and Peloponnese) for a further year after Hobhouse's departure. His travels provided material for the first and second cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) as well as the spate of “Turkish tales” which sprang from his pen during the years of fame (1812-1816). *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was a literary phenomenon of the day and a poem that gave Byron instant fame. As Roderick Beaton points out, Byron had been able to turn his experiences and opinions about Greece and its modern inhabitants “into a bestseller” (3).

Byron's Grecian poetry emphasizes the sadness of the poet for the departed glory of Greece. In his lamentations over the ruins of decayed Greece, Byron stayed within the lyrical tropes, attitudes and manners shaped by the tradition of literary philhellenism. As Terence Spencer points out, the poet “was following in the footsteps of scores of other Englishmen in Greece... His links with the many writers of the preceding centuries who gave their opinions, and recounted their emotions, about Greece (like William Haygarth or Charles Kelsall) were obviously considerable” (290). Thus, the poet’s wandering about the ancient Greek landscape and his listing of places famous in history, his passionate lamentations over the ruins of decayed Greece, his hopeless attempt to revive with his pen the great heroes, poets and philosophers of the past, the description of the natural beauty of Greece, the musing on Greece’s lost liberty, were well-tried eighteenth-century literary images. The following lines exhibit a variety of Romantic Hellenism (i.e. the interest in ancient Greece or the Grecian model), in which Byron’s lightly fictionalized alter ego visits Greece:

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*And yet how lovely in thine age of woe,*  
*Land of lost gods and godlike men! art thou!*  
*Thy vales of ever-green, thy hills of snow*  
*Proclaim thee Nature's favourite now. (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto II, 85)*

*Wher'ver we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground,*  
*No earth of thine is lost in vulgar mould,*  
*But one vast realm of wonder spreads around,*  
*And all the Muses' tales seem truly told (CHP II, 88).*

*Fair Greece! sad relic of departed worth!*  
*Immortal, though no more! Though fallen, great!*  
*Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth,*  
*And long accustom'd bondage uncreate? (CHP II, 73)*

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To answer this charged question, the narrator's mind inevitably turns to the old comparisons—the heroes of antiquity who know the spirit of freedom:

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*Climb of the unforgotten brave!*  
*Whose land from plain to mountain-cave*  
*Was Freedom's home or Glory's grave*  
*Shrine of the Mighty! Can it be*  
*That this is all remains of thee?*  
*Approach thou craven crouching slave—*  
*Saw, is not this Thermopylae? (The Giaour II.103-109)*

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*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage II* and *The Giaour* develop generally along a pattern of praise for a moving landscape or sight followed by lament for beauty spoiled by whatever causes, seen collectively as man, war, death and time. The desecration and degradation of Greece are the most difficult instances of ruined beauty which the narrator-poet must bear. The tragic contrast between ancient glory and contemporary degradation
establishes a mood of anxiety for the irretrievable loss of the classical past which looms over Byron’s address to the prospective European travelers to these historic places:

Let such approach this consecrated land,
And pass in peace along the magic waste:
But spare its relics—let no busy hand
Deface the scenes, already how defac’d (CHP II, 93)

Despite the pillaged Acropolis (II, x-xv) and the spiritless indolence of the Greeks who do not take up the cause of their own freedom (II, 73-86), reasons enough for despair, the narrator sounds a positive note in his delight over the natural beauty and fertile fields of Greece to admit that “Art, Glory, Freedom fail—but Nature still is fair” (II, 87) and to acknowledge Greece as a spiritual home for the world’s dispirited (II, 92): “Greece is no lightsome land of social mirth / But he whom Sadness sootheth may abide, / And scarce regret the region of his birth, / When wandering slow by Delphi’s sacred side” (CHP II, 92). But Greece is also the watchword and the safeguard for Freedom. For Byron, past glories should not only be a cause for despair but the stimulus to achievement among the Greeks and Europeans too.

Despite of every yoke she bears,
That land is Glory’s still and theirs!
‘Tis still a watch-word to the earth.
When man would do a deed of worth
He points to Greece, and turns to tread,
So sanctioned, on the tyrant’s head:
He looks to her, and rushes on
Where life is lost, or Freedom won (The Siege of Corinth ll. 371-78).

Without doubt, Byron relied on a well-established tradition, yet he could express his predecessors’ opinions and emotions “with an intensity hitherto unknown” (Spencer 290). In other words, his musings on the decline of ancient glory, though conventional in content, are memorably expressed, and so “the old attitudes are suddenly revivified” (290). This explains why Byron’s versions of what were commonplaces became canonical. Traditional settings and monuments were filtered through his “intense receptiveness to what he saw in Greece” (Spencer 289) and translated into a histrionic language that captured Europe, exciting feelings about a collective ideal construction of Greece in his English readers.

Byron was also one of the first to attempt to substantiate the Greek revival with evidence from the modern Greeks in their own words. Being “profoundly committed to learning about another culture” (Grammatikos 236) and believing in the value of observed realities, Byron immersed himself in Modern Greek culture, language, and literature and made every effort “to draw from his knowledge of the country’s contemporary reality and to move away from a purely classicized vision of Greece” (240). This is an important point of divergence from previous poets, thinkers and travellers who idealized Greece. As Beaton argues, Byron “from the start had a political turn of mind” (4) and addressed the subject of Greece in an extraordinary way, expressing his thoughts freely (though often ambiguously) about the country’s contemporary culture and political future. The emphasis on experience is one that is entirely consistent with Byron’s ambitions and aesthetics. Although self-knowledge is an inevitable dividend of travel, the more obvious value for Byron lay in the empirical evidence of places, men, and manners that furnished the mind in order to entertain ideas.
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, The Giaour, and the other Romantic poems in which Byron employed the Hellenic background were important sources of influence for the American poets. The emotional strains which dominate Byron's lines are affected in the verse of the Greek cause through various poetic expressions and forms. Written in 1821, a little after the outbreak of the Revolution, and published in the journal The Minerva, James Gordon Brooks's poem “Greece” is a dirge on the modern tragedy of Greece in the characteristic Byronic manner.

Land of dead heroes, living slaves!
Shall glory gild thy clime no more;
Her banner float above thy waves
Where proudly it hath slept before?
Hath not remembrance then a charm
To break the fetter and the chain;
To bid thy children nerve the arm,
And strike for freedom once again?

(Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 3)

For Brooks, Greece is a land of dead heroes, a “lost land.” In sentimental language the narrator evokes the glorious past of Greece, its “remembrance,” and sheds tears over her decayed body. This retrospective, meditative and in moments morbid poetic mood is a marked characteristic for a great part of the American verse on the Greek cause.

The same melancholic mood pervades the poem entitled “To Greece” by the poet with the pen name “Clarence” published in The Philadelphia Album, and Ladies’ Literary Gazette on 26 September 1827. The enslaved country must “weep for [her] fallen dominion” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 24) while the poet laments the dearth of heroes and reproaches the modern Greeks for their servility and inaction: “Oh where is the hero of battle now / Who strove in thy conquering ages; / Who look’d on the world with a laurel brow / In the beauty of valour’s wages? / He has pass’d away to the ruthless grave” (24). These lines remind us of Byron’s effusive rhetoric in which the English poet reproached the Greeks for their servility to the Turks and exhorted them to strike their blow for freedom: “Hereditary bondsmen! Know ye not / Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?” (CHP II, 76). The passages about Thermopylæ, Salamina, Thrasyboulus, and the often quoted dirges over the corpse of what had once been the home of liberty, which found expression in the opening stanza of The Giaour, are reflected or imitated in the lines of the American poets in a variety of ways.

Even though by 1827 and 1828 the Greek struggle had won important victories, many of these poems open their long hymns with Byronic echoes of the Greece that was, or of “ruin’d grandeur—glories that have been” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 26). This pessimistic attitude was due to the various military and political disappointments during the long course of the War of Independence. But the majority of American poems project optimism about the regeneration and the future prospects of Greece (expressed through a series of panegyric lines, such as odes, songs and hymns), a genuine love for the country, and a strong faith in the final victory of her cause. In this respect, the continuing evocation of ancient Greece is not to contrast her with the modern enslaved and degraded land, but to stress the continuity and the unity of her national life. The following lines from a poem published anonymously in 1825 in The United States Literary Gazette suggest that old and modern Greece are not separated: “Hail to thee Greece!—thou art still the bright portal / To those regions that bloom in thy fanciful lore!” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 16); or in the poised style of James
Gates Percival's address to Greece, “Never shall thy glory set; / Thou shalt be our beacon yet” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 41). In a less sentimental tone, William Cullen Bryant's sharp lines prophesy the end of Greece's pain and sufferings: “Thou shalt arise from midst the dust and sit / Again among the nations. Thine own arm / Shall yet redeem thee... Thine is a war for liberty, and thou / Must fight it single-handed” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 63). But Bryant’s optimism is a difficult one for even though Greece’s cause is just, the country will have to “fight it single-handed,” without counting on foreign aid. The concluding lines of Bryant’s poem bear an apocalyptic tone: “Yet thy wrongs/Shall put new strength into thy heart and hand / And God and thy good shall yet work out, / For thee, a terrible deliverance” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 63). In general, however, morbid mood, desperation and pessimism give place to enthusiasm, faith and hope about the future of Greece, best expressed in the numerous exhortations which usually follow the spirit of the Greek War Song “Sons of the Greeks, arise” which had been translated by Byron and published in 1812 in the Notes to Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto II.

The indifference of the foreign nations suggested by Bryant is heavily criticized by many American poets who are appalled at seeing all the powers of Europe joined together as unmoved spectators of Turkish despotism and of cruelties against the Greek people: “Shame on the nations who calmly look on, / While freemen in torrents are shedding their blood; / View the crescent wave where the cross has shone, / And a heathen’s tower where the Christian’s stood” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 17). Notably, the religious dimension of the struggle between East and West is always present in English philhellenic literature. The idea of a brave Christian people fighting the heathen Turk was a source of sympathy for the American nation too.

For Byron, Greece is “Freedom’s home” and the symbol of the general revival of liberty. The victory and resurgence of Greece was thought to have the power to renew “human culture in the west at a moment of its deepest darkness” (McGann 260). In anticipation of such renewal, George Hill writes, “The dungeon’d Nations now once more respite / The keen and stirring air of Liberty” while James G. Brooks in his poem “Freedom” sees in the victory of Greece the arrival of universal peace and happiness: “Soon shall earth wake in might; / Retribution shall arise; / And all regions shall unite, /To obtain the glorious prize; / And oppression’s iron crown, / To the dust be trodden down” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 11). But in some poems we see that it is the American republic, instead of Greece, that is identified with freedom. This is the case with “Greece,” one of the earliest poems on the Greek cause published in The Minerva in 1822, which opens with a hearty exhortation to Americans to save Greece from ruin: “Freedom! From thy tranquil home, / Fast by the Atlantic wave, / Haste, from their impending doom, / Greece’s hapless sons to save” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 18). As Roessel explains, because the American and Greek revolutions were regarded as “kindred events... the Greek rebellion was sometimes seen as a validation and extension of the American experiment as well as a return of the classical past” (93). In similar vein, William Cullen Bryant tells of Greece “In yonder mingling lights / There is an omen of good days for thee” (Roessel 93). The nexus of such works is the historical import of early nineteenth-century America and its role in the international scene. This idea reflects a larger poetic movement in America in support of national determination and freedom all over the world, especially among the oppressed peoples of Europe and South America. In the numerous odes dedicated to Freedom and Liberty, and national heroes, America is portrayed as the home of the brave and the free, as the champion of
human liberty who ought to continue the struggle for freedom, even outside her national limits, by supporting the insurgent enslaved peoples. Hence Lydia H. Sigourney’s resounding call to the West to help Greece and restore her: “Up, thou New World!—The eye of Greece is dark, / Her glory waneth.... Up, pay thy debt. Restore her more than all / the burning alphabet of eloquence / Or the proud language of the arts could teach” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 141).

Moving away from the sentimental approach, the American verse of the Greek cause can get as realistic and graphic as the dramatic scenes of the struggle it describes. Many of these poems are free from the classical allusions and concentrate instead on contemporary elements and specific events: the Massacre at Scio (1822), the Siege and the heroic fall of Missolonghi (April 1826), the battle of Navarino (1827). They are passionate and direct and convey a martial spirit, as well as strong feelings of wrath and revenge. Thus in William Cullen Bryant’s 1825 poem “The Greek Partisan” the young warrior vows to shatter the chains of Greece and spill the invader’s blood: “Chains are round our country pressed, / And cowards have betrayed her, / And we must make her bleeding breast / The grave of the invader” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 58). In similar vein, Bryant’s “The Grecian Amazon” is a poem about a female brigand who goes to the mountains after the Turks have killed her beloved and vows to avenge his death: “They slew him—and my virgin years / Are vowed to Greece and vengeance now / And many an Othman dame, in tears, / Shall rue the Grecian maiden’s vow” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 59). As Roessel usefully reminds us, it was Byron who in the Giaour and the other Tales created the image of the klepth for Western readers (59). But the best known portrait of a Greek hero/warrior belongs to the most famous American poem about the Greek War of Independence, Fitz-Greene Halleck’s “Marco Bozzaris.” It appeared first in June 1825 in the New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine and was received with enthusiastic praise in America and the rest of the world. Halleck made Bozzaris’s fame universal through his dramatic description, subtle lyrical mood and martial imagery. “Marco Bozzaris” reminds us of Byron, and The Giaour in particular, in its arresting military scenes, the fast and controlled narrative, the mix of lyricism and realism, and the dramatic clamor of voices that overlap:

An hour passed on—the Turk awoke;
That bright dream was his last;
He woke—to hear his sentries shriek,
‘To arms! they come! the Greek! the Greek!’
He woke—to die midst flame, and smoke,
And shout, and groan, and sabre stroke,
And death shots falling thick and fast
As lightnings from the mountain cloud;
And heard, with voice as trumpet loud,
Bozzaris cheer his band:
‘Strike—till the last armed foe expires;
Strike—for your altars and your fires;
Strike—for the green graves of your sires;
God—and your native land!’
(Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 109)

Other poems focus on the sufferings of the people, “widows, orphans, who had mourn’d / Husband slaves, and parents slain” (Raizis and Papas, Greek Revolution 19) and on Greek emigrants like Christodoulos Evangelidis, whose evocative portrait we find in Bryant’s 1828 emblematic poem “The Greek Boy”; here, the boy becomes the symbol of
hope for the resurgence of modern Greece; yet the depiction of the country in Bryant’s lines emerges as seriously ambivalent: “And Greece, decayed, dethroned, doth see / Her youth renewed in such as thee: / A shoot of that old vine that made / The nations silent in its shade” (Raizis and Papas, *Greek Revolution* 61).

20 American poetry for the Greek cause is still an open chapter in the history of literary philhellenism and transatlantic studies. A full appraisal of this cultural phenomenon would require an extensive search of the archive and the circumstances that shaped the writing, transmission, and reception of this poetry. In my paper I have discussed selected cases of American Byronism in the poetry of the Greek cause of the early nineteenth century. I have argued that the said poems reflect the rich and multifarious engagement of Byron’s American followers with the poet’s philhellenic lines, and with his image of Greece which he had fixed in the European and American imagination. Byron’s influence on the early American poets in relation to their treatment of the Greek national struggle was resounding and lasting. It is worth stressing that his attachment to the Greek cause was chiefly understood by the American poets as a humanitarian’s determination “to serve the cause of world freedom” (Raizis and Papas, *American Poets* 14). Consequently, Byron’s philhellenic sentiments were identified with the national ideals and democratic spirit of the early years of the American republic.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**NOTES**


2. Marios Byron Raizis and Alexander Papas, on whose 1972 compilation of American Philhellenic poetry I have been based for this paper, have done important work in the field, which however remains largely unexplored.


4. Byron had difficulty in making up his mind about the merits of the moderns Greeks and their prospects of freedom. A few months after his return to England Byron was writing to Hobhouse: “My own mind is not very well made up as to ye. Greeks, but I have no patience with the absurd extremes into which their panegyrists & detractors have equally run” (*Byron’s Letters and Journals II*, 3 Nov. 1811).

5. Byron translated four folksongs from Modern Greek and a section of a political satire, the *Rossangégallos*. The most popular was the Greek version of the Marseillaise, “Δεῦτε παῖδες τῶν Ἑλλήνων,” which Byron wrongly attributed to Rigas Velestinlis in his comment to the translation. The poem is overtly political and a vigorous exhortation to the “sons of the Greeks” to emulate their glorious ancestors and rise against the “Turkish tyrant’s yoke,” a theme rehearsed repeatedly in Canto II but also in “The Isles of Greece” (*Don Juan*, Canto III). Byron’s long and extensive prose notes and appendixes to Canto II, illustrating a mind struggling with the political realities and absurdities of his time, put a different light on Childe Harold’s Romantic and abstract musings on the subject of Greece.

6. Two well-known American poets of the period who devoted lines to the national struggles of enslaved peoples were James Gates Percival and William Cullen Bryant. Percival wrote effusive pieces on Russia, Serbia, Poland, and Bohemia; he celebrated the spirit of liberty in poems on Norway, Germany, Wales, and issued a rousing call for cessation of fighting in his “Apostrophe to the Island of Cuba.” See *The Poetical Works of James Gates Percival*, with A Biographical Sketch, in two volumes, Vol. II, Ticknor and Fields, 1863, and *The Poetical Works of James Gates Percival*, Ticknor and Fields, 1859. William Cullen Bryant celebrated Spain’s struggles and the 1868 Glorious Revolution in his poems “Romero” and “A Brighter Day,” and Italy’s uprising in “Italy.” See *Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*, D. Appleton and Co., 1906.
ABSTRACTS

This essay traces Byron’s presence in early nineteenth-century American culture and his extensive influence on philhellenic poetry written during and after the Greek Revolution. After exemplifying how Byron’s philhellenic verse read throughout Europe made him the champion of modern Greece, I explore the ways Byron’s lines inspired a host of poets across the Atlantic. My discussion aims to demonstrate the American poets’ rich and diverse engagement with Byronic modes, hoping to bring a deeper understanding of the texts in question as well as of the historical frames surrounding them.

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Keywords: Lord Byron, philhellenism, American poetry, journals, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, William Cullen Bryant, James Gates Percival, Fitz-Greene Halleck

AUTHOR

MARIA SCHOINA

Maria Schoina is Associate Professor of English Literature in the School of English of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. She is the author of Romantic “Anglo-Italians”: Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle (Ashgate 2009; Routledge 2016). Her most recent publications include two essays on Mary Shelley’s Greek studies (The Keats-Shelley Review 2019; Notes and Queries 2020), a chapter on the Pisan Circle in Byron in Context (Cambridge UP, 2020) and a chapter on Byron’s reviewers for The Oxford Handbook of Byron (forthcoming, 2022). She has also edited a volume of translations of Romantic poetry in Greek entitled Anthology of Romantic Poets (Ανθολογία Ρομαντικών Ποιητών) recently published by Kedros (Athens 2021). She was the organizer of the 2021 International Byron Conference (online, Thessaloniki, 28 June-2 July 2021).