4. Byron and the politics of writing women

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To examine representations of women in the work of a poet who documented in his journal that they 'ought to mind home − and be well fed and clothed − but not mixed in society' (*BLJ* 8.15: 6 January 1821) and who derided women writers as 'spayed bitches' (*BLJ* 7.218: letter to John Murray, 4 November 1820) is inevitably a politically charged act. Nowhere is the negotiation of critical politics more charged than in discussions of Byron's writings on female intellectuals. Whilst explicitly misogynistic declarations in both his poetry and private correspondence are manifold, his satirical treatment of the bluestocking is notoriously impolitic. From the unforgiving portrait of Donna Inez in the opening canto of *Don Juan* (1818), to the largely uncommented-upon satirical sketch, *The Blues* (1823), Byron's mockery of the female intellectual not only confounds attempts to exonerate him from charges of misogyny, but, more significantly, compromises efforts to draw attention to radical portrayals of women elsewhere in his work. Indeed, despite ongoing attention to the active individuality of his heroines,[1] his inclusion in critical discourse surrounding gender politics and Romanticism is neither secure nor self-evident. In excluding the poet from her study on *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne Mellor reveals pervading hostility to the notion that Byron's work offers anything other than 'the hegemonic domestic ideology of the Romantic period'.[2] Whilst convincing cases have been made for the importance of Byron's *oeuvre* in readings of Romantic gender politics since

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1 See Franklin, *Byron's Heroines*, Leask, *Writers and the East*, and Saglia, *Poetic Castles*.

2 Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* 109.

Mellor,[3] his treatment of the female intellectual continues to evoke scholarly squeamishness. This chapter more directly considers the gender politics of Byron's relationship with the long-eighteenth-century woman writer through his satirical depictions of her. The title of the chapter points in two directions: to the cultural politics of the bluestocking culture of the writing, thinking, reading woman, and to the politics of writing such women into satirical verse.

Byron's mockery of the intellectual woman poses a political difficulty for the gender-conscious critic: are we required to vindicate Byron's perceived misogyny in order to find critical value in his verse? If we wish to absolve Byron from such chauvinistic sinning, then a plausible critical strategy for the gender critic is to offer counter-examples to such uncomfortable instances. Such counter-examples may be exhibited through Byron's friendships with women, his reading, and the content of his library, in addition to his own poetic portrayals of female individuality and autonomy. From his early acquaintance with Elizabeth Pigot at Southwell, to those with Mary Shelley, Madame de Staël, Lady Melbourne and Jane Apreece (later Lady Davy, wife of Humphrey Davy), Byron had a series of close and intellectually rewarding friendships with women. Although no works by women appear in Byron's 1807 reading list *(LBCMP* 1-7) other than those of the ones he has been 'making love to' *(LBCMP* 6) instead of reading – with the exception of Sappho – the three later sale catalogues of his library indicate an ongoing interest in literary and historical representations of femininity. At various times, he owned novels by his literary contemporaries Jane Austen, Hannah More, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Mary Robinson; popular memoirs such as Mary Berry's *Life of Lady Rachel Russell* (1819) and life-writings of the *femmes savantes* Madame de Pompadour and

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3 See Wolfson, *Borderlines*.

Louise d'Epinay.[4] In Byron's poetry also, we might witness an evident shift from juvenile (and Juvenalian) male chauvinism to enlightened maturity. In his early lyrics, women feature either as idealized subject matter, as in 'On the Death of a Young Lady' (1802), or as faithless and duplicitous, as in the series of four 'To Caroline' poems (1805-6). Yet in Byron's later work we find varied examples of aspects of female independence and fortitude: from his exploration of female sexual autonomy in Haidée (*DJ* cantos 2 and 3, 1819-21), to his challenge to contemporary gender binaries in the active individuality of Kaled (*Lara*, 1814), or – more radically, perhaps – his construction of female heroes such as Neuha (*The Island*, 1823).

Each of these critical strategies to exonerate Byron from charges of misogyny, however, risks even more firmly excluding poems such as *The Blues* from critical discourse: it becomes an anomaly at best, and an embarrassment at worst. Certainly, Byron purported to place little significance on the play, describing it as 'a mere buffoonery never meant for publication' (letter to John Murray, 20 September 1821, *BLJ* 8.216). This chapter will identify and interrogate ways in which we might find critical value in Byron's lampoons of female intellectualism, without attempting to mitigate the overtly sexist basis of the satire. Rather than palliate this uncomfortable fact, this chapter sees the generic convergence of satire and sexism in Byron's work as drawing upon satirical models from antiquity, whilst existing in dialogue with a rich tradition of bluestocking satires by his contemporaries.

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[4] Although Byron never refers to Austen in his work, the 1813 catalogue reveals that Byron possessed first editions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* (see Cochran, 'Byron's library' 1); see the 1816 catalogue *(LBCMP* 231-45) for novels by More, Burney, and Edgeworth (especially items 229, 72, 9, 95 and 96). The three memoirs (Berry, Pompadour, and d'Epinay) are in the 1827 sale catalogue (*LBCMP* 245-54), items 206, 6 and 54.

Felicity Nussbaum identifies the 'antifeminist satiric tradition' emerging from the earliest extant texts of antiquity − from Hesiod, Horace, Ovid and Juvenal.[5] This extensive lineage may be in part explained by the curious suitability of satire for the articulation of misogyny. As Rosa Braidotti explains: 'In a sense, the satirical text is implicitly monstrous, it is a deviant, and aberration in itself. Eminently transgressive, it can afford to express a degree of misogyny that might shock in other literary genres.'[6] Whilst we know that Byron was familiar with the writers Nussbaum cites, how far they offered viable models of satirical misogyny has remained largely unconsidered.[7] Both Claude Fuess and Mary Clearman have suggested Juvenal as a model for Byron's early satirical work, particularly *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1807), but neither suggests the possible impact of Byron's reading of Juvenal on his later work.[8] Certainly, the barbed wit of the later Roman poet brings with it a suitable mode to lampoon those seen as somehow socially ridiculous and worthy of mockery. Dryden's characterization of Juvenal in contrast to the more polite satire of Horace reveals why: 'His Thoughts are sharper, his Indignation against Vice is more vehement'.[9] Juvenal's Satire 6, sometimes referred to as 'Against Marriage' (but which could more accurately be described as 'Against Women'), exemplifies how this invective was put to work against the women of Rome. Commentators have noted the particularly vehement misogyny of Juvenal's satire. Katherine Rogers terms it 'the most horrifying of all catalogues of female vices',[10]

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5 Nussbaum, *Brink* 3. Watson and Watson similarly identify Hesiod as being 'at the fountainhead' of such discourse; see *Juvenal* 26.

6 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 80.

7 An exception is Padmini Murray's observation that Horace's fifth Epode may serve as a model for early misogynistic sketches such as the undated 'A Portrait' *(LBCPW* 1.30), *Gender* 59.

8 Fuess, *Lord Byron* 51; Clearman, 'A Blueprint' 89.

9 Dryden, *Progress of Satire* 65.

10 Rogers, *Troublesome Helpmate* 38.

Amy Richlin 'the single largest example of invective against women surviving from antiquity',[11] and even Byron's contemporary Francis Hodgson comments on the 'apparent savageness of disposition' which characterizes Juvenalian satire, and 'which particularly disfigures his sixth satire'.[12] Satire 6 is an occasional poem purportedly composed on hearing the news that a friend is soon to be married. What follows is a catalogue of female vice, in which some 20 lines are dedicated to the particular evils of the learned woman (434-56). A short excerpt from Hodgson's translation shows the nature of the attack:

> I hate the woman who can talk by rule,
>
> And knows the canons of the grammar school;
>
> Who quotes old verses that I never heard,
>
> And catches at her friend's unpolish'd word.[13]

How familiar Byron was with Satire 6 is a matter of speculation.[14] It was one of the five translated by Dryden, and Byron owned three contemporary translations of Juvenal: a popular edition by Martin Madan; one by his Cambridge friend Francis Hodgson, and another by the critic and editor William Gifford.[15] Rogers has suggested that 'Despite his jocular tone, Byron's dislike of the faultless woman recalls Juvenal's'.[16] Certainly, both Juvenal (line 456) and Hodgson's translation make explicit the agony of the man espoused to the learned lady, which Byron famously

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11 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus* 203.

12 Hodgson, *Juvenal* 85.

13 Hodgson, *Satire* 6, l.666-9 (lines 451-6 in standard editions of Juvenal). A more literal translation reads: 'I loathe the woman who is forever referring to Palaemon's *Grammar* and thumbing through it, observing all the laws and rules of speech, or who quotes lines I've never heard, a female scholar. Do men bother about such things? It's the language of her philistine girlfriend she should be criticizing.' See Braund 277.

14 See Beaty, 'Byron's imitations'.

15 See 1816 sale catalogue items 210, 168 and 172 *(LBCMP* 237-9).

16 Rogers, *Troublesome Helpmate* 205.

renders: 'Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, / Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck'd you all?' (*DJ* 1.175-6). Susan Wolfson points out that the difficulty these lines pose for the twenty-first-century reader is that the comedy 'has to be purchased in a pact about she-smarts as torture to men'.[17] We might, then, seek to compare the motivation behind Juvenal's acerbic critique and Byron's various satires as examples of male fears of inadequacy in the face of women who possess more knowledge than they do.[18] This excessive volume of knowledge is satirically manifest in both writers' portrayal of learned women talking too much and too loudly. Juvenal's satire opens by stating the particular evils of the intellectual woman who insists on talking about literature over dinner, rendering her companions silent (434-40) before likening the penetrating tenor of the learned woman's voice to the clashing of metal implements (441-3). Such stentoriousness is similarly satirized by Byron in his 'Rules to be Observed by Ladies' (undated), where his would-be *Belle Esprit* is advised to 'be careful to let no Persons voice be heard but your own'. In the same piece, he imparts the following advice for the aspiring bluestocking:

> If you wish to be thought a Woman of genius talk a great deal about History Poetry &c &c &c but above all things pretend to be an enthusiastic admirer of the fine arts, by these means you will impose on all who are more ignorant than yourself.[19]

The imposition of knowledge upon those 'who are more ignorant' finds a clear parallel in Hodgson's lady's 'catch[ing]at her friend's unpolish'd word', yet is markedly different from Juvenal, who complains that it is 'the language of her philistine girlfriend she should be criticizing' rather than that of her husband. The

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17 Wolfson, *Borderlines* 173.

18 See Johnson on Juvenal's speaker's fears of inadequacy in 'Male Victimology' 178.

19 For the first publication of this text, see Camilleri, 'Rules'.

crucial distinction, then, between Juvenal's and Byron's satires on female intellectuals is that whereas Juvenal attacks the overzealous and earnest female scholar, Byron castigates the woman who purports to have more knowledge than she possesses. As such, we move from the undeniable misogyny of the Juvenalian critique, which appears to emerge from the speaker's own sense of inadequacy, to something different – the critique of the hypocrisy of false learning.

It is evident from the examination of writers such as Juvenal that Byron's treatment of the bluestocking is by no means a new satirical subject. Anglo-Saxon scholar and linguist Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756) wrote in resigned tones of the anti-intellectual spirit of the eighteenth century:

> This is not an Age to hope for any encouragement to Learning of any kind. […] you can come into no company of Ladies and Gentlemen where you shall not hear an open and vehement exclamation against Learned women, and by those women who read much themselves to what purpose they know best.[20]

The learned women of the eighteenth century, were, then, derided by both sexes – both in print and in person. Nussbaum sees the years 1660 to 1750 as an especially intense period of misogynistic treatment of female intellectuals.[21] Yet 1750 appears rather too conservative an end-date for the study of a hatred that fuelled satires well into the nineteenth century. By the time *The Blues* was published (anonymously) in *The Liberal* in 1823, lampoons of learned females were a well-established sub-genre of satire. A useful comparison is with Fanny Burney's *The Witlings* (1779) – Burney's first theatrical comedy, which was a dramatic satire of the bluestocking circle of which Burney was part. Little comparative work has been done on *The Blues*

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[20] Cited in Smith, *Mary Astell* 169-70.

[21] Nussbaum's study focuses on the Restoration and eighteenth century as exhibiting 'a clear line of continuous antifeminist poetic portrayal', *The Brink* 2.

and *The Witlings*, partly because Byron could not have known Burney's play (which remained unpublished until 1995, shortly after its first performance in 1994).[22] Nevertheless, Elizabeth Fay has commented upon the 'curious historical fact' of Byron's close recreation of a play he could have had no knowledge of.[23] Burney's play opens with Lady Smatter (a thinly-veiled satire of the Queen of the bluestockings, Lady Montagu) forbidding her nephew Beaufort to marry his fiancée Cecilia, who has recently been financially ruined. By various unethical means, Beaufort's friend Censor reinstates the match by holding Lady Smatter to ransom through the threat of a sustained printed campaign against her, beginning with the publication of a satirical ballad which reveals her to be an intellectual fraud, and continuing with lampoons in every coffee house – a curiously apposite punishment for a woman who inflicts her knowledge of print culture upon audiences regardless of their willingness to hear them. Whilst Katherine Rogers has remarked on the 'strange perversity of Burney's play – the mockery of a brand of woman with whom Burney ostensibly identified – Burney's recent editors Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill rightly remind us that 'Such satire of would-be intellectuals, […] was a commonplace of the eighteenth-century stage.'[24] Burney's play, then, is an illuminating partner piece for Byron's *The Blues*, with both plays illustrating the pervading antagonism towards the self-identifying bluestocking.

Mellor raises an intriguing question when she asks: 'Why did British public opinion turn so roundly against the bluestockings in the early nineteenth century, so much so that the very term was transformed from one of grudging approval to one of

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22 There was a private reading by Dr Burney to a small audience in August 1779, which included Samuel Crisp and Burney's sisters. See Burney, *The Witlings* xiii-xv for an account of the play's suppression, and xxxi-xxxii for its belated recovery and eventual production in November 1994.

23 Fay, *Fashioning* 292.

24 Rogers, *Frances Burney* 19; Burney, *Witlings* xv.

universal derision?'[25] Sylvia Myers attributes such hostility to suspicion of the intellectual woman's competence − 'when women took an interest in intellectual affairs they were almost bound to display affectation and incompetence'[26] − alongside the stereotype of compromised femininity, the bluestocking being presumed to be 'slipshod and unkempt in appearance'.[27] Mellor, however, suggests that something more complex might be at work, and that such hostility may emerge from the politics of reading women. By the early nineteenth century the most powerful market for literature was predominantly feminine – and, as Mellor has indicated, women readers existed 'in numbers large enough to form a critical mass'.[28] The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century male writer, then, had plenty to fear from this formidable group. Byron begged his publisher Murray to ensure anonymous publication of *The Blues*: 'don't let *my* name out – for the present – or I shall have all the old women in London about my ears – since it sneers at the solace of their antient Spinsterstry' (*BLJ* 8.172: 7 August 1821), unwittingly echoing Hester Thrale's explanation of Burney's suppression of *The Witlings*, which she attributes to 'fear of displeasing the female Wits'.[29]

Even though Byron could not have known Burney's play, he *would* have been alert to numerous similar productions throughout the eighteenth century. Thomas Moore's *MP, or, The Bluestocking* (1811) offers the most sustained satirical treatment prior to Byron's *Blues*, and Susan Ferrier's novel *Marriage* (1818) and John G. Lockhart's *Peter's Letters to his Kinfolk* (1819) also contain sketches of

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25 Mellor, 'Romantic Bluestockings' 15.
26 Myers, *Bluestocking Circle* 294.
27 Myers, *Bluestocking Circle* 303.
28 Mellor, 'Romantic Bluestockings' 18.
29 Cited in Burney, *Witlings* 300.

overenthusiastic and affected female literati.[30] The author's anxiety about the control that the female intellectual readership was perceived to wield over the success (or otherwise) of the male author is satirically sketched in Christopher Anstey's poem *The Author's Conversation with his Bookseller* (1768), which went through numerous editions before being appended to his *New Bath Guide* in 1808. The setting of Anstey's poem is Mr Slider's bookshop, piled high with books just 'come out'. The author of a recent publication overhears with horror the disapproving Lady Bonton and Miss Barbara Slop leaving shop empty-handed after deeming the bookseller's wares unfit for consumption:

> Mr. SLIDER, you've nothing that's clever, I doubt;
> No book that's engaging and pretty come out.
> What an Age of Barbarians! there's nothing, God knows,
> That's worth one's Attention, in Verse or in Prose.[31]

The fate of a publication, then, was vulnerable to the whims of female taste, with women , as Jane Stabler comments, as 'the supreme arbiters of the destination and reputation of new poetry';[32] or, as Byron writes in *Don Juan, '*fame is but a lottery, / Drawn by the blue-coat misses of a coterie*'* (*DJ* 4.871-2). The hostility towards the bluestocking, then, can be read as commercially motivated. Being deemed worthy of the attention of the female reader was a matter of economic survival for the male author. Although Ghislaine McDayter casts Byron as a victim of female consumption – as one more ravished by his readers 'than anybody since the Trojan war' (*BLJ*

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30 Myers offers a summary of these in relation to Byron's poem in *Bluestocking Circle* 290-303.

31 Anstey, 'Author's conversation' 168. Murray discerns a plausible line of influence between Anstey's satire and *The Blues* (see *Gender* 26). In addition to thematic concerns, the two plays also share the anapestic tetrameter as a verse-form.

32 Stabler, *Poetics* 3.

6.237: B to Richard Belgrave Hoppner, 29 October 1819) – the poet himself denies the pressure of a female readership:[33]

> Neither will I make "Ladies books" "al dilettar le femine e la plebe" [to delight women and the common people] – I have written from the fullness of my mind, from passion – from impulse – from many motives – but not for their "sweet voices" (*BLJ* 6.106: B to John Murray, 6 April 1819).

Byron's emphatic denial may well, as McDayter contends, be a case of the Lord protesting too much, but this refusal to concede power is reinforced by a calculated slur on this dominant female readership, who are here grouped alongside the tasteless masses.

Yet the bluestockings were, frequently, not just well-educated readers but also (as in the case of, for example, Burney, Thrale and More) themselves writers. Nevertheless, reading is in this period presented as a markedly feminine pastime compared with writing, contrasting passive observation with the creative exertions of the pen. Characterizing the female reader as an impotent writer, therefore, and casting women as mere readers, is the cruellest of satires. The power of writing lies in the power of shaping that which is observed – the power to objectify. Medwin's recorded conversations of Byron may well be apocryphal, but they imply that Byron was alert to this potency: 'my imagination has always delighted in giving them [women] a *beau idéal* likeness, but I only drew them as a painter of statuary would do, – as they should be' *(MCLB* 73). Or, as Byron rather more pithily writes in *Don Juan*: 'You read my stanzas, and I read your features' (*DJ* 4.883). The prominent bluestockings of *The Blues* and *The Witlings*, Lady Bluebottle and Lady Smatter, are not just readers,

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[33] McDayter, *Byromania* 43, writes of Byron's female readers that 'the poet came increasingly to regard [them] as insatiable beings who fed upon his literary corpus to satisfy their taste for the Byronic.'

but also bad readers and poor critics. In *The Blues*, Sir Richard Bluebottle is a living example of the hen-pecked spouse previously satirized by Byron in the opening canto of *Don Juan*:

> No pleasure! no leisure! no thought for my pains,
> But to hear a vile jargon which addles my brains;
> A smatter and chatter, gleaned out of reviews,
> By the rag, tag, and bobtail, of those they call 'Blues';
> A rabble who know not – (*Blues* 2.20-4).

Crucially, Byron's Blues articulate little other than empty verbosity: 'a vile jargon' informed by the disposable fast-thought culture of the review and periodical. As a group, they are the most disreputable and disorganized rag-tag – and this evaluation seems to hold true for their thoughts, language, and personage. In his poetic characterization of the Blues as a 'rabble', Sir Richard echoes his creator's sentiments concerning the plebeian tastes of female readers. A case might be made that these elements of Byron's satire demonstrate an alertness to and engagement with the politics of female emancipation and learning. Certainly, Burney's similar satirization of such poor readerly powers in *The Witlings* appears to comment upon the exclusion of the female reader from traditional institutionalized learning. Judy Simons, for instance, argues that in *The Witlings* Burney's chief satiric target is the mis-education of women.[34] Sabor and Sill concur, asserting that 'Lady Smatter is, in fact, not ineducable, but a victim of the practice of depriving women of the systematic education afforded to men'.[35]

Central to satires on female intellectuals from the late seventeenth century onwards is the limited nature of female knowledge. Poor selective powers are

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34 Simons, *Fanny Burney* 127-8.
35 Burney, *Witlings* xxi.

manifest in mistaken critical judgment, particularly when it comes to poetry. Burney's Lady Smatter effuses over the poet dandy Mr Dabler: 'I know not in what Mr. Dabler most excels, epigrams, sonnets, odes or elegies' (2.217-18). To remove any doubt as to the quality of Dabler's scribblings, Burney offers various examples of his work, including the following epigram:

> Ye gentle Gods, O hear me plead,
> And kindly grant this little loan;
> Make me forget whate'er I read
> That what I write may be my own (2.196-9).

Dabler's lines fall short of competence in both form and content. The stumblings of poorly-crafted iambic tetrameter verse and the clumsy insistence of the monosyllabic rhymes provide an apposite vehicle for the sentimentality of an inspiration derived from plagiarism and legitimized through forgetfulness. Byron's *The Blues* reveals Lady Bluebottle's poor taste through her love of 'Wordswords' (Byron's more polite moniker for Wordsworth, *Blues* 2.47). Such bad judgement is amplified in her inarticulacy on the subject of literature and poetry. Lady Bluebottle has only two verbal strategies. One is effusion:

> the joy of my heart
> Is to see Nature's triumph o'er all that is art.
> Wild Nature! – Grand Shakspeare! (*Blues*, 2.113-15).

The other is speechlessness:

> […] for one moment of feeling
> Is worth – God knows what (2.162-3).

It is through her lack of critical language that Lady Bluebottle displays her limited powers of critical discernment.

Such inability to say anything about a subject so rich in material is analogous to these figures' verbosity on subjects of little merit. Inarticulacy and verbosity are symptoms of the same kind of critical inadequacy. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Byron finds particular comic potential in the loquacious woman. An early instance is the verbose Laura of *Beppo*, who bombards her recently returned husband with a tirade of 12 questions in 20 lines, regarding his 'pagan name' (725), his culinary and dietary habits (731 and 733), his marital status (730) – rather cunning given her own adulterous relationship – his health (736), and the length of his beard (739). Bathos is effected by the impossibility of Beppo providing an adequate response: 'What answer Beppo made to these demands, / Is more than I know' *(Beppo* 745-6). Byron's own experience of the verbose habits of intellectual women was in part drawn from reality. He writes of Madame de Staël to Annabella Milbanke on 10 November 1813 asking, 'Do you know her? I don't ask if you have *heard* her? her tongue is "the perpetual motion"' (*BLJ* 3.160).[36] Byron's most famous bluestocking portrait, Donna Inez, can be loquacious even in silence: 'Some women use their tongues – she look'd a lecture, / Each eye a sermon, and her brow a homily' (*DJ* 1.113-14). To be loquacious, verbose, or simply talkative is not to be mistaken for eloquence. In talking much these figures say very little.

If verbosity is talking beyond your means, then a dominant symptom of such verbosity is misattribution. The most exaggerated kind of misattribution is the kind of lexical infelicity Sheridan's Mrs Malaprop made famous in *The Rivals* (1775): her name in French, *mal à propos*, literally meaning 'not to the purpose'. In *The Witlings* the sin of misattribution is one of allusion and the misplaced, *mislaid* citation. Such absent-mindedness is something that Lady Smatter plays upon to strike the posture of

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[36] B similarly comments in his journal, 'this same lady writes octavos, and *talks* folios' (*BLJ* 3.207: 16 November 1813).

someone with an extensive readerly experience: 'How true is it that modesty, as Pope, or Swift, I forget which, has it, is the constant attendant upon merit!'[37] Her failure to recall the source of her epigram is double-edged. It is not only a symptom of the careless reading that produces the kind of diffuse and indiscriminate knowledge her name suggests, but is also an easily-recognizable type of literary pretension, particularly when the writers in question are of such marked stature as Pope and Swift. If we are to emphasize careless reading as the predominant fault of the satirical figure of the bluestocking, then the inevitable temptation for the critic is to find the correct source for these mis-citations. Sabor argues that Lady Smatter refers to Swift:

> Here Lady Smatter seems to have in mind a sentence in a letter from Swift to the Earl of Peterborough of 4th May 1711: "I doubt I shall want such an advocate as your Lordship; for I believe, every man who has modesty or merit is but an ill one for himself."[38]

Pope's *Dunciad* yields another plausible source; in a note to line 86, the poet remarks: 'as all true merit is modest and reserved; and the false, forward and presuming'.[39] The joke here is on the false and presumptive Lady Smatter. Yet these critical scavengings assume that Lady Smatter did in fact possess sufficient (rather intimate) knowledge of Swift's correspondence or Pope's marginalia. It is, however, entirely plausible that she has read neither and is, instead, flaunting knowledge she does not possess. Variations of the phrase 'modesty is the true attendant of merit' were in wide circulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, in Robert Campbell's *London Tradesman* (1747) we learn that 'Modesty, a constant Attendant on true Merit, is a powerful Enemy to the young Counsel, and buries the best

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37 Burney, *Witlings,* 2.153-4.
38 Sabor, 'Burney and Swift' 472.
39 Pope, *The Dunciad* 4.86.

Talents',[40] and in *Some Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. J– H–, Inspector General of Great Britain* (1752) we are told of '*Diffidence*, inseparable from Modesty, and a constant Attendant on true Merit'.[41] William Richardson's 1756 letter to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine* opens, 'As modesty is the constant attendant on merit';[42] and, most pertinently perhaps, in a review of bluestocking Hannah More's *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777) we are alerted to the author's 'unaffected modesty, which is the constant attendant on true merit'.[43] Such eclectic source material is demonstrative of what Byron's Lord Bluebottle castigates as 'A smatter and chatter, gleaned out of reviews' (*Blues* 2.22). Lady Smatter's pretentiousness, then, is further demonstrated by her call upon the authority of Swift and Pope to sanction her use of what is really a rather commonplace sentiment.

Lady Smatter's *mal à propos* literary allusions are exemplary of hypocrisy, of 'a *false pretending*' as William Cobbett defines it.[44] In short, Lady Smatter is guilty of cant. For Byron, the period in which he lived and wrote was 'The Age of Cant':[45]

> The truth is that in these days the grand "primum mobile" of England is *Cant* – Cant political – Cant poetical – Cant religious – Cant moral – but always *Cant* – multiplied through all the varieties of life. – It is the fashion – & while it lasts – will be too powerful for those who can only exist by taking the tone of the time (*LBCMP* 128: 'Letter to John Murray Esq^re^', 1821).

It is revealing, therefore, that Byron's chief satirical targets – the bluestockings and the Lake poets – both suffer from the same fault. Satirical portraits of the two occur in

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40 Campbell, *London Tradesman* 76.
41 Kennedy, *Some Remarks* 55.
42 Richardson, 'Letter' cited in *Monthly Magazine* 223.
43 Kenrick, [review of] *Essays* 268.
44 Cobbett, *Twelve Sermons* 1-2.
45 See Wilson, *Decency* 328-55.

close proximity to each other. The first canto of *Don Juan* contains the unforgiving satire of Donna Inez, and also Juan's parody of failed Romantic musings. Juan's 'unutterable' (1.714) thoughts are aligned firstly to the 'unintelligible' (1.720) Wordsworth, and then the 'metaphysician' Coleridge (1.728), before his longings become too transparently physical to sustain the charade: 'If *you* think 'twas philosophy that this did, / I can't help thinking puberty assisted' (*DJ* 1.743-4). Likewise, much of the comedy of *The Blues* rests on the satirical connection forged between the Lakers and the Blues:

> How does your friend Wordswords, that Windermere treasure?
> Does he stick to his lakes, like the leeches he sings,
> And their gatherers, as Homer sung warriors and kings? (*Blues* 2.47-9).

The friendship between Lady Bluebottle and Wordswords is one that rests on the tenuous foundation of self-elevation. Given that much of Byron's comedy finds its impulse in bathos, there is only one direction that such high-minded posturing can take in his satirical verse.

To answer the question of whether or not Byron's satirical portraits are misogynistic has not been the purpose of this chapter. Rather, by accepting such apparent misogyny as central to his satire, it has been possible to draw previously undiscerned connections with an existing body of literature by writers of both genders and provide a greater understanding of Byron's comic practice. The reasons Byron finds to laugh at bluestocking culture are the same ones that cause him to laugh at the Lakers: the earnest hypocrisy that, in its tonal inflexibility, is misapplied and misreads people, situations and ideas. It is the very antithesis of Byronic *mobilité*. That Byron's critique of bluestocking culture in general, and of would-be female intellectuals in particular, is motivated by a hatred of cant rather than of women is significant for how

we comprehend the gender politics of his writing. As I suggested at the opening of this chapter, such notoriously unpalatable gender politics stimulate a crisis for the twenty-first-century feminist (or even simply female) critic as to the ‘correct’ (or most politic) way to read Byron. Yet it is only through closer examination of those writings deemed to be most problematic that the richness and complexity of his engagement with gender politics from antiquity to the Romantic period is revealed.

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