
Paul Elledge. *Lord Byron at Harrow School: Speaking Out, Talking Back, Acting Up, Bowing Out*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. 221p.

L. ADAM MEKLER
MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Paul Elledge's *Lord Byron at Harrow School: Speaking Out, Talking Back, Acting Up, Bowing Out* is a comprehensive examination of Lord Byron's experiences during what Elledge shows to be a crucial period: Byron's matriculation at the Harrow School outside London from shortly after his thirteenth birthday in 1801 until his departure at seventeen in 1805. By focusing on Byron's development during his adolescence, Elledge is certainly on safe ground when he highlights the significance of this period on Byron's developing sense of identity. Nevertheless, Elledge successfully reveals how for Byron this time was especially important in determining what Elledge describes as "the text that Byron would famously become" (2). Elledge uses Byron's three Speech Day performances in 1804 and 1805 as the focal points for a critical reading of his life that encompasses a multitude of factors, both social and psychological.

Essentially, Elledge argues, these performances "encoded and reflected a host of anxieties, conflicts, rivalries, and ambitions which they also helped him to manage" (1). Primary among these concerns is Byron's interaction with several important figures in his life, including members of his family (his mother, Augusta Leigh, Mary Duff), their circle (Henry Yelverton, Lord Grey de Ruthyn; Mary Ann Chaworth; John Hanson), and school associates (especially the Drurys: Joseph, Mark, and Henry). In addition, Elledge focuses on issues, including his physical disability, his relative impoverishment, and his lack of social connections, which prevent him from gaining smooth entrance into the social world of Harrow. These factors, therefore, necessarily become the main focus of the discussion of his experiences there. In fact, the specific analysis of the speeches themselves—from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Edward Young's *The Revenge*, and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, respectively—account for only about one-fifth of Elledge's discussion. The primary sources for his discussion, then, become the young Byron's letters and journals, in addition to his later letters and poems that refer back to the events occurring during his stay at Harrow.

As a consequence, Elledge frequently participates in conjecture about the underlying significance of many of Byron's seemingly innocuous statements, presenting interesting insight into the texts he examines. Unfortunately, however, at times this speculation can be carried too far. For example, his discussion of one of Byron's letters to Augusta includes this passage: "Byron signs off, this time reversing the

order of his relatedness to ‘Friend and Brother,’ as though both offering and needing the first, in active expression, more urgently” (44). Later, foreshadowing his discussion of Byron’s *Lear* speech, Elledge describes how one letter to Augusta “establishes the solidarity of offspring against the parent (compare the matrix of conflict in *King Lear*, the text from which Byron excerpts his recitation for 4 July)” (71). While such connections may be valid—though comparing his mother to King Lear is certainly a stretch—they do suggest an unnecessary desire to uncover every possible example of the developments he describes in Byron’s sense of self. Although Elledge acknowledges this tendency, even his disclaimers occasionally seem to cancel themselves out: “By citing these references I do not suggest that Byron is already plotting the seduction of his half sister or finds in them encouragement to do so. But as others have pointed out, all of Byron’s early (female) loves belonged to his extended family” (119). One might wonder why such a qualification is necessary.

To be fair, such examples are only aberrations in an overall exceptionally written book. For the most part, Elledge weaves the different threads of his argument together with precision, especially when exploring Byron’s relationships to the Drurys and his changing perception of the obstacles that initially impede his enjoyment of Harrow. Elledge effectively demonstrates how each of the three Speech Day performances allows Byron to foster and express an increasingly strong sense of self-confidence as he prepares to assume a more adult position in society. The culmination of this success occurs when Elledge shows that Byron’s choice of Lear as his final speech before leaving for Cambridge is a mature one, precisely because of Byron’s apparent indifference to the possibility that this speech might “revive the ridicule of his lameness, poverty, and marginalization” (158). By specifically mentioning each of the three concerns that have been most significant to his discussion of Byron, Elledge is able to bring them all together at the end to establish an effective and logical conclusion.

As Elledge makes clear, one of his intentions in developing such a close reading of Byron’s early forays into the public sphere is to allow for a better understanding of Byron’s more mature writings. Elledge achieves this aim by discussing not only those works, such as *Hours of Idleness* and *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, written most closely following his departure from Harrow, but also such important later works as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, all of which, Elledge reveals, have clear origins in Byron’s more juvenile expressions in both oral and written forms. In the end, then, Elledge’s book presents a sophisticated appreciation of the importance impact of childhood experiences in general, but especially on the complex and intriguing figure of Lord Byron. ✱