

A TEI Transcription of *Conversations with Lord Byron*

Melissa Ann Smith

Thesis submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

David Radcliffe

Peter Graham

Shoshana Milgram Knapp

May 5, 2010

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Byron, Blessington, biography, conversation, New Monthly Magazine

A TEI Transcription of *Conversations with Lord Byron*

Melissa Ann Smith

ABSTRACT

This project accompanies a TEI transcription of Lady Blessington's *Conversations with Lord Byron*, currently available on the *Life and Times of Lord Byron* online archive. Although often cited in biographies of Lord Byron, Lady Blessington's *Conversations of Lord Byron* has received little critical attention. Further, the genre of Blessington's work, the conversation as a biographical form, suffers the same dearth of critical material.

My aims, then, are to 1) present a brief history of the conversation as biographical form; 2) examine the publication history of the *Conversations* and underscore the social dimensions of its publication; and 3) evaluate Blessington's rhetorical strategies in the *Conversations* and to argue that Blessington's work is superior to two other accounts of Byron (by James Kennedy and Thomas Medwin) in terms of its psychological depth.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	iv
Chapter 1: The Conversation as a Biographical Form: A Brief History	1
Chapter 2: Publication History of <i>Conversations with Lord Byron</i>	11
Chapter 3: Blessington, Kennedy, and Medwin Compared	23
Appendix A: Biography of Lady Blessington	38
Appendix B: A Narrative of the TEI Transcription Process	43
Works Cited	46

## Introduction

My thesis project initially began as a TEI transcription of Lady Blessington's *Conversations with Lord Byron* and evolved into an exploration of a history of the *Conversations* as well as an investigation into the conversation as a biographical form.<sup>1</sup> In the course of my research, it became apparent that Lady Blessington's oeuvre has received little critical attention, including the *Conversations*, which retained its status as her best-known work. In what follows, I supply historical and critical backgrounds for the text I have edited to indicate what Blessington was trying to accomplish and why this was significant.

Although the *Conversations* is the primary object of focus for this thesis, a secondary concern is an exploration of the "conversation as a biographical form," a genre suffering the same dearth of material as the *Conversations*. Biographers of Byron have mined the *Conversations* for information, but little has been written about conversations as a biographical form, and as a result, Blessington's innovations as a life-writer have not been acknowledged. Recent books concerning both Romantic biography and Romantic periodical print culture omit such an overview of the conversation as a biographical genre in the Romantic era. I begin my first section by discussing Blessington's predecessors in conversation writing; although the conversation had been a very common genre from the time of Plato, its use as a specifically biographical form was comparatively recent. I show that the publication of conversations as biographical material was a relatively new genre when Blessington was writing. Further, the rise in biographical materials resulted in debates as to how to portray the "inner life" of a man.

The second section examines the publication history of the *Conversations* and argues for my choice to study (and edit for the online Byron archive) the serialized 1832–33 version over

---

<sup>1</sup> The TEI version of the *Conversations* is currently on the *Life and Times of Lord Byron* website; however, the bulk of this thesis does not address that document, save for Appendix B.

the 1834 volume.<sup>2</sup> I have selected the original periodical format in order to underscore the social dimensions of its production, in which Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the editor of the *NMM*, was involved, and of its reception by a reading public familiar with the rhetorical devices common to periodical publications.

A critical look at the *Conversations* begins in the third section. I examine Blessington's rhetorical strategies and overall structure as key to seeing her philosophy of biography, which I argue is unique among biographers of Byron. I compare her *Conversations* to those of James Kennedy and Thomas Medwin to underscore the originality of her use of the conversation genre, and to show how Blessington's work acts as a precursor to psychobiography. Attached appendices include (A) a brief biography of Lady Blessington and (B) a narrative of the TEI transcription process.

---

<sup>2</sup> The 1832-33 serialization in the *New Monthly Magazine*; the 1834 volume assembles all the conversations with an introduction by Lady Blessington. Both versions were published by Henry Colburn.

## Chapter 1: The Conversation as Biographical Form—A Brief History

Conversations in printed form can act as several things: among them, philosophical dialogue, conduct manual, autobiography/memoir, and biographical material. It is the latter I am primarily interested in, for it is this form that the *Conversations with Lord Byron* takes. The publication of conversations in the form of the Blessington/Byron *Conversations* was a relatively new phenomenon in the world of biographical writing. No sooner had this account of Byron been published than new standards of Victorian life writing restricted what could—or ought to—be said in a biography. As an addition to the biographical subgenres, the conversation or insertion of dialogue became “the easiest way to lend biography something of the realistic air of fiction” (Altick 209). The following section provides a brief overview of the conversational form as it developed in Britain in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries leading up to the publication of the *Conversations*.

### Pre-Eighteenth Century

The conversation, dialogue, or *entretien* as a literary text has a lengthy history which initially “adopted the pleasing, persuasive manner of refined speaking to record existing social forms and to promote new social ideals” especially in many Italian texts “closely linked to the analysis of the behavioral patterns of their contemporaries” (Vidal 100). While biography had been a component of dialogue-writing from the beginning, it was used as a framing device for rhetorical exchanges, to provide context for the sentiments expressed in the rhetorical exchanges.

For romantics like Blessington, biography becomes an end rather than a means; the sentiments expressed in the conversation becoming vehicles for the development of character.<sup>3</sup>

Publications of English biographies prior to the seventeenth century were not numerous, particularly in the Elizabethan age; however, some—including Sir John Hayward and Francis Bacon—attempted to make a distinction between historical writing and the writing of lives (Kendall 93). Full-fledged English biographies were generally reserved for religious and aristocratic figures prior to the seventeenth century, largely due to the “prevailing ideas of a hierarchy in Church and State...determin[ing] the main course of biography. The lives of ecclesiastical and temporal princes were worthy of record; the lives of their subjects were not” (Stauffer 132).

It is true that Boswell’s book on Johnson was a groundbreaking form of the biography and imitated after its publication in 1791, but the incorporation of “conversation” or dialogue into biography has roots in the practice of collecting *ana*, or sayings; for instance, a 1694 publication by French lawyer Gilles Ménage of thoughts on the legal profession is “Ménagiana.” *Table Talk*, an edited collection dealing with well-known British lawyer John Selden, utilizes the *ana* form to collect Selden’s opinions in a dictionary-style publication as “discourses,” these discourses reflect his career as well as views regarding the state and religion, with sample entries including “bastards,” “damnation,” “power, state,” and “war” (Selden).

William Roper’s *Life of Thomas More* (published in 1622, although composed at least sixty years prior to its publication) includes “conversational interludes [that] refresh the flow of narrative” (Altick 209). The *Life* covers More’s life chronologically, integrating his dialogues

---

<sup>3</sup> I should be clear that the Platonic dialogue—and its variations in philosophical texts and from Cicero and Berkeley—is not considered part of this phenomenon, nor do I consider this philosophical form of discourse a form of biography. I also consider the famous conversation between Diderot and Alembert to fall into a philosophical as opposed to a biographical form. I briefly mention some French forms as precursors to the British biographical conversation; this topic is not fully developed in this thesis, and is certainly worth further investigation.

with Roper—More’s son-in-law—as well as with others; some of these are brief snippets of conversations, some of these are longer speeches. The work is short, but the incorporation of dialogue eliminates glosses on certain periods of More’s life to provide a more realistic portrayal of specific events; glosses are imprecise and general, while dialogue suggests a “true” account of the subject and strengthens the credibility of the author.

Izaak Walton’s “Lives” are filled with quotations “purported to be direct quotations from his subjects’ lips” (Altick 209). Walton’s *Life of George Herbert* (1670) does not have conversation or dialogue, but rather incorporates what Herbert “*would say*” or “*said*” in response to a situation; Walton writes that Herbert, while sick with “rheums” and possibly “consumption,” “*would often say*, ‘Lord, abate my great affliction and increase my patience; but, Lord, I repine not, I am dumb, Lord, before thee, because thou doest it.’” (52-53; italics mine). The incorporation of this repeated short prayer adds drama to Herbert’s physical ailment; it also gives the reader a glimpse into the private moment of prayer.

Roper’s and Walton’s biographies mark the beginnings of an interest in individualism; British biography in the seventeenth century reflects the growing “range of subjects thought appropriate for a Life broadened with the rise of the middle classes and with social movements towards democracy” (Lee 29). The increasing publication into the eighteenth century creates a “diversity of forms and a wide array of autobiographical activity” (Kendall 96)

### *Eighteenth Century*

The “cultural rise of interest in the individual” emerged out of the combined increase in middle-class readership and advancement of distribution and printing technology resulted



(Cafarelli 3).<sup>4</sup> As the eighteenth century progressed, more biographies were written for a wider audience and with diverse subjects; frequent biographical subjects were powerful individuals (heads of state, war heroes), sensational accounts,<sup>5</sup> and accounts of adventures and travels (Stauffer 199). Another documented phenomenon was self-publication or “acquainting the public of one’s life and opinions,” largely by merchants and self-made businessmen (Stauffer 137). Many literary and artistic figures wrote biographies or had biographies written about them; as the century drew to a close, the word “autobiography” makes its first appearance in print (in the *Monthly Review* in 1797) (Kendall 102). The eighteenth-century biography was primarily interested in “the art of representing individual lives,” a sentiment that “prevailed until, in our own time, advances in psychological theory enabled biographers to proceed from depiction to explanation of personality” (Browning 25).

Insofar as there was a focus on “representing lives” and “studying man,” it is unsurprising that dialogue and conversation played an increasing role in the published biography. Notable works of the period incorporating *ana*, conversations, and dialogue include Hester Thrale’s *Anecdotes in the Life of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786), Joseph Spence’s *Anecdotes and Conversations of Alexander Pope* (the remarks collected in the 1730s and 40s, but not published until 1820), and James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791). In a way, Boswell’s *Life* follows its subject’s philosophy of biography: “Nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him” (Browning 119). Richard Altick sees that Boswell’s biography as displaying the “triumph of dialogue” by providing “snatches of talk [that] contributed to the sought-for illusion of reality. The great triumph of

---

<sup>4</sup> At this point, many writers on biography point to the “creation of the self,” as well as Foucault’s examination of the epistemological shift from “taxonomic” to “organic-historic” ways of examining the self. See Ralph Pite’s “Writing Biography that is not Romantic” in *Romantic Biography*.

<sup>5</sup> “Hanging was the most nearly certain way to immediate biographical fame in the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (Stauffer 199).

dialogue, as opposed to speeches by one figure, came with Boswell, whose remarkable fears of reproducing conversation [...] the old-fashioned set pieces of speech with extended dialogue in the manner of the drama) gave new authority for the practice” (209). The work focuses largely on Boswell’s time with Johnson, and skims over the rest of Johnson’s life. As the conversations were conducted nearly thirty years prior to the publication, many other biographies emerged in the meantime; as a consequence, Boswell asserted his account of Johnson as the most “authentick.”

In response to the warts-and-all treatments of celebrities like Pope and Johnson, terms and restrictions on biographical material developed; certain biographies were dangerous for revealing *too much*, a conservative sentiment that restricted biographical content as the Victorian era progressed in the next century. William Godwin’s 1798 *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindications of the Rights of Woman* only proves this shift; Godwin’s work—which explored Mary Wollstonecraft’s early life through his experiences with her as well as through friends’ recollections—was scandalous in its revelations about Wollstonecraft’s premarital affairs, resulting in “attaching to the opprobrium of his wife’s name the opprobrium of his own, and Wollstonecraft’s reputation entered the nineteenth century doubly burdened” (Todd 722). A belief existed among some biographers—and critics of biography—that, “through intimacy with the subject...loyal friendship will incline him to keep the vices out of sight” (Browning 120). Of course, this was not true in the case of Boswell and Johnson; even though Boswell’s biography was groundbreaking, it was “shocking” in “fashionable and conservative circles...Boswell’s willingness to report exactly what people said in private conversation” (Clifford 22). It is interesting then to note the same “porous line” Romantic writers saw between their published work and private correspondence; the former was “often scandalously autobiographical,” while

the latter often became public after death (Lee 54). The turn of the century saw a wide and fast-growing publication of biographical material—letters, conversations, and diaries—with subjects unwittingly “Boswellized.”

### Nineteenth Century

Nineteenth century trends in biography can be roughly characterized as the following: an increase in “life-writing” augmented by publication of biographical documents *not* strictly biographies (especially conversations), followed by a Victorian encouragement of “retrogressive suppression of information in the name of decorum” (Cafarelli 70). Being a subject of life writing appeared an “unpleasant prospect” for later Victorian writers: “Thackeray and Arnold forbade authorized biographies, Dickens burned correspondence, and George Eliot denounced biography as ‘a disease of English literature’” (Cafarelli 70). While the first three decades were rich in biographical materials—some of which were extremely scandalous—the remainder of the century was not.

Mirroring the increase in biographical publications, and, perhaps, as a consequence of Boswell’s biography on Johnson, is also a lack of the comprehensive biography and collective biography. In his *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Joseph Reed argues in spite of the continuing trends, the opening of the nineteenth century marked a breaking point in the history of the art of biography. No longer was the central concern of biography the interior man or the genesis and progress of character and personality...the externals of life writing had become more important than internal order. There was too great a concern with collection and exhaustive compendia, too little with the biographer’s prerogatives of selection, arrangement, and timing. (25)

Cafarelli expounds on this point, adding that many writers turned to these non-fiction forms because of their potentially lucrative revenue; she claims that publication of biographical forms based largely on anecdotal material was tied directly to “issues of audience because of its easiness to read and its ready absorption into the periodical press” (70). Exemplary of this “anecdotal” style is the conversation.

The conversation, or anecdote became such a popular published form and had “moved so far in development, independent of other genres it customarily supported, that it was on the verge of becoming a genre itself” (Reed 12). These conversations posed many problems, not the least of which lies in the reliability of the author; on this topic Altick believes in a “high probability...that the auditors who first wrote down and published these reports were less concerned with literal accuracy than with fidelity to the *spirit* of the man and the occasion. They had no qualms about rewriting conversations as freely as nineteenth century biographers improved the ‘tonal quality’ of letters, and for precisely the same reasons” (320–1). Such objections plagued authors reporting “conversations,” including, as we shall see, Lady Blessington.

Many biographical historians point to James Stanfield’s 1813 *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* to emphasize the advances biographical forms had taken. Stanfield’s text is more philosophical than it is instructive or didactic; it argues for a mixture of “sympathetic emotion,” “impartiality,” and “moral illustration” and for censoring “particulars” which “do not reflect great honour on the deceased,” all of which are clearly applicable to published conversations (21, 27, 14). A recent article by Jane Darcy argues against the significance of this publication; it was little read (based on publication numbers) and reviewed in only one magazine. If Stanfield is viewed in concert with other publications seeking to establish

standards for biographical reporting, we get a larger picture of objections to fragmented “life writing” forms, and arguments in favor of comprehensive biography.<sup>6</sup>

Romantic writers—among them, Wordsworth, Scott, DeQuincey, and Hazlitt—contributed to the publishing phenomenon. Hazlitt’s *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft* (1816) has “recurrent passages of conversations” (Altick 210). Hazlitt called his *Conversations* (1820) with the painter James Northcote “Boswell Redivivus,” but it wasn’t short of scandal; in between serialization in the *New Monthly* and its printing proofs, Northcote demanded retraction of several passages, threatening libel suits (Wu 425). After its publication—without the exorcising as requested by Northcote—Alexander Dyce “noted the artist ‘professed himself angry...with Hazlitt for having printed his *Conversations*’ yet ‘believe[d], that in his heart he was gratified by the notoriety which that entertaining miscellany had given him’” (qtd. in Wu 426).

An additional example of the new conversational form is found in Thomas Jefferson Hogg’s account of Percy Bysshe Shelley, “loaded with lengthy dialogues and Shelleyan monologues” (Altick 210). Altick, however, doubts the legitimacy of the work: “that his is a reasonably verbatim report is, to say the least, dubious. If Hogg’s quotations are authentic, he must have been blessed with total recall; if they are not, he had remarkable powers of invention”

---

<sup>6</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, author of *Life of Robert Burns* (1828) and *Life of Walter Scott* (1837), had a principle on reporting conversations in order to avoid “falsity”: “To report conversations fairly, it is a necessary prerequisite that we should be completely familiar with all the interlocutors, and understand thoroughly all their minutest relations, and points of common knowledge, and common feeling, with each other. He who does not, must be perpetually in danger of misinterpreting sportive allusion into serious statement; and the man who was only recalling, by some jocular phrase or half-phrase, to an old companion, some trivial reminiscence of their boyhood or youth, may be represented as expressing, upon some person or incident casually tabled, an opinion which he had never framed, or if he had, would never have given words to in any mixed assemblage—not even among what the world calls *friends* at his own board. In proportion as a man is witty and humorous, there will always be about him and his a widening maze and wilderness of cues and catchwords, which the uninitiated will, if they are bold enough to try interpretation, construe, ever and anon, egregiously amiss—not seldom into arrant falsity.” (Altick 319)

(210). This approach to a published biographical conversation suggests an artistic impulse to aestheticize the subject, or, in the case of *Conversations*, to aestheticize the dialogue.

As the Victorian Age began, readership and production of these biographical materials continued with “retrospective and introspective essays, reveries, Coleridge on Coleridge, and Henry Crabb Robinson on everybody, diaries, journals, autobiographies, biographies” and “letters, anecdotes, and bits of conversation” (Reed 12; Kendall 102). This “flood” of life-writing materials received further criticism, namely in the “gap...between what man knew of man and what man permitted himself to know;” life-writing materials were gradually silenced as “pseudobiography took its place” (Kendall 104–5).

Lockhart’s biography of Scott contained a lengthy principle on ethically reporting conversations (as cited above); this seemed to signal a change in the biographer’s attitude, and showed Lockhart clearly on the defensive. In his 1828 *Life of Robert Burns*, Lockhart prefaces the work with an apology.<sup>7</sup> Lockhart’s later *Life of Walter Scott* received criticism “that [Lockhart] has been too communicative, indiscreet, and has recorded much that ought to have lain suppressed,” a claim on which Thomas Carlyle cheekily commented: ‘How delicate, decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth! A Damocles’ sword of *Respectability* hangs for ever over the poor English life-writer (as it does over poor English life in general) and reduces him to the verge of paralysis” (Carlyle 29).

Lady Blessington’s *Conversations with Lord Byron* arrived just as this transition was about to take place; it could be said that the reaction against the inclusion of unflattering details in biographies—beginning with Boswell—culminated with the copious texts on Byron’s life. Byron was, prior to and at the publication of the *Conversations*, unrivalled as a subject of life

---

<sup>7</sup> “Some apology must be deemed necessary for any new attempt to write the ‘Life of Burns.’”

writing. Byron's reputation and public image were just as exciting for readers as his poetry, if not more so, making him "the first 'celebrity' author": "Byron's readers formed such a massive group that they have been seen less as discerning readers and more as rapacious consumers" (Throsby 228). This voracious appetite for all things Byron extended past his death. Richard Altick points out:

the high valuation which was placed on the very words that issued from the lips of a poet was most extensively demonstrated in the case of Byron. Virtually all the biographies and books of reminiscence appearing in the decades just after his death strove to reproduce as much as the authors could remember, or persuade their readers they remembered, of Byron's talk. More than 150 men and women printed, at one time or another, their recollections of his conversation. The dramatic quality of Byron's life made it almost impossible to keep fictional devices out of his biographies. Leigh Hunt, for instance, described, in pages that might easily be thought to be taken from a novel, a Byronic uproar with his servants at Leghorn, and John Galt turned Byron's deathbed into a scene worthy of a third-rate sentimental novel. (209–10)

Byron was indeed a commodity; although eight years had passed since his death, interest in his life had not waned, and "the time was ripe for Blessington to tap an emerging Byron legend" (Soderholm 141).

## Chapter 2: Publication History of *Conversations with Lord Byron*

Although eventually published in book form—with an introduction by Blessington—in 1834, the *Conversations* as published in the *New Monthly Magazine* are what primarily concern us as primary text. The *Conversations* were published in eleven installments in the *New Monthly Magazine* (*NMM*) from 1832-1833; the 1834 book (published by Henry Colburn, publisher of the *NMM*) retains no evidence of the original part-structure. There have been subsequent reprints of the 1834 book; the most informative is Ernest J. Lovell's prefaced and footnoted edition of 1969. The motivation to use the *NMM*'s printing for the purposes of this project was, at first, practical: (1) the work exists in the public domain, allowing for the TEI version to go up on the *Byron* website without legal issue or complication; and (2) the serialized text allowed me to engage in slightly more complicated coding. But as I researched the *Conversations*, it became apparent that the *NMM* publications engaged with more significant cultural, historical, and political issues around their production than did the 1834 book.

After her continental tour and husband's death, Lady Blessington moved back to London and established herself at her Seamore Place residence. In opening a salon that regularly welcomed literary and political figures from Charles Dickens to Benjamin Disraeli, she quickly picked up where she had left off. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, radical and editor of the *NMM*, became a regular visitor to Seamore Place and a lifelong friend and confidant to Blessington. In 1832, he suggested that she write up her notes on her 1823 meetings with Byron in Genoa to publish in the *NMM*.<sup>8</sup> The *Conversations* appeared in eleven installments between 1832 and 1833 in the *NMM*; Blessington published an anthologized version as a book in 1834 published by Henry Colburn.

---

<sup>8</sup> Blessington later published her account of her continental tour in 1839's *Idler in Italy*, in which she briefly mentions Byron.



No literary form suited Blessington more than the conversation. Her salon existed to promote polite discourse and intelligent discussion for its male guests. Lady Blessington *valued* conversation; her abilities as a conversational player were legendary. Just as the seventeenth-century “aristocratic art of conversation took hold of the manners of bourgeoisie... primarily because the accessibility and value of noble status in France intensely motivated the bourgeoisie to adopt aristocratic attitudes,” the *Conversations* allowed a glimpse into the conversational behavior of both Byron and Blessington; although topics and people were certainly interesting, the *Conversations* are equally compelling for Byron’s and Blessington’s rhetorical strategies, especially with Blessington acting as Byron’s foil (Vidal 79). In fact, one friend and contemporary of Blessington—the essayist Peter George Patmore—argues that the *Conversations* are “flat and spiritless—or rather, marrowless—compared with Lady Blessington’s own *viva voce* conversations *of* him, one half-hour of which contained more pith and substance—more that was worth remembering and recording—than the whole octavo volume in which the printed *Conversations* were afterward” (162).

The *Conversations* function as a two-fold biographical form: they relate the biography of Byron as well as the life of Blessington herself. In terms of the latter, it provides a record of how Blessington navigated through conversations, put Byron at ease, chided him, but kept offenses at bay with her charm. Although the *Conversations* do not cover Byron’s entire life as a comprehensive biography might, they act as a record of Byron within a year of his death in Greece. The *Conversations* also testify to the popularity of biography as a topic of conversation; within their dialoguing, Byron and Blessington frequently mention popular biographies of their day.

Although Lovell, in his introduction to the *Conversations*, claims that Blessington approached Bulwer-Lytton to publish “driven by necessity,” it is debatable whether her financial situation was so dire at that point; according to Michael Sadleir, the roles were reversed, and Bulwer-Lytton approached Blessington (Lovell 91). A biography of Bulwer-Lytton places their meeting after the *Conversations* commenced publication, noting that Blessington and Bulwer-Lytton corresponded as early as 1830 (Mitchell 95). Regardless of the circumstance, their friendship lasted until Blessington’s death, with Blessington widely lauding Bulwer-Lytton’s talents and Bulwer-Lytton contributing—and soliciting contributions for—Blessington’s annuals<sup>9</sup> (ibid). Bulwer had as much incentive to publish the *Conversations* as Blessington needed it to be published; the *New Monthly* was both a financial and political endeavor. He needed to keep the publication profitable and hold onto readership; the success of the *Conversations* would ensure just that. Bulwer-Lytton’s aims with the *NMM* acted as critical response and revenge to “turn its fire power on his enemies” and “establish new standards for criticism” (Mitchell 117).

It must also be pointed out that the *Conversations* were published during a period in which the magazine existed as the “preeminent literary form of the 1820s and 1830s,” a claim made by Mark Parker in *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism*. As mentioned in section one, the increasing specialization of the magazine and reading public contributed to the proliferation of specific biographical subgenres. The periodical format itself is as crucial to understanding the content as the content is to the periodical; before examining the *Conversations*, I will take a cue from Parker and provide background on the *NMM* and Bulwer-Lytton.

---

<sup>9</sup> Following her husband’s death, and the success of the *Conversations*, Blessington began editing *The Keepsake* and *The Book of Beauty*.

The *NMM*, owned by London-based book publisher Henry Colburn, who had also published Medwin's *Conversations* and Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, "strove to meet a changing political scene by being saleable enough to meet costs while advertising the popular books that were its publisher's main business" (Sweet 148). Colburn moved from a "sober, double-columned product" from 1814 to 1820, to Thomas Campbell's tenure from 1821 to 1830,<sup>10</sup> followed by Bulwer-Lytton's permission to "promote electoral reform overtly in all sections of the magazine" from 1831 to 1833, and ending with an "emphasis in humor" by editors Theodore Hook and Thomas Book until 1845 (Sweet 148; Parker 141). In *Romantic Genius in the Literary Magazine*, David Higgins argues that the representation of genius in a magazine directly corresponded with the magazine's own ideological aims; Bulwer-Lytton's editorship of the magazine, as well as the *Conversations*, attests to this claim.

Bulwer-Lytton's editorship of the *NMM* from 1831 to 1833 allowed him to push a reformist agenda, as well a personal desire to make "a career of some honour and a name that shall not die" (as told to Lady Blessington, qtd. by Sadleir in Christensen 55). A typical *NMM* during Bulwer-Lytton's tenure would contain some combination of the following: political discussion (a column called "The Politician" typically begins the volume); memoirs; several pieces of poetry; a lengthy prose piece; a short memoir excerpt; a history piece; lengthy letters from readers concerning political or economic conditions; short obituaries; fifteen-to-twenty short book reviews with a list of recent publications; and notices (proceedings of societies, money market reports, bankruptcies, brief digest of the month's events). He actively promoted democratizing literary creation for the reading public by "demand[ing] a new breed of post-Reform writers who could aid social progress by communicating with ordinary people" (Higgins

---

<sup>10</sup> According to Mark Parker, Campbell claimed to "cautiously allow 'political zeal,' so long as it works 'without outraging authority,'" but that he also "insisted on a sphere of cultural exchange secure from politics" (141).

79). This attitude is reflected in the introduction to the *NMM* publication of the conversations, as both a justification for their publication and their necessity as part of the Byron biography:

His [Byron's] character and his mind ought to be public property, and every sound judgment must allow that we have no right to follow our inclination alone in the omission of passages that may hurt the vanity of individuals. Papers of this sort are a trust not for individuals—but for the public—if there is complaisance on the one hand, there is justice on the other: if it be desirable that Byron's real opinions should be known, we are not to stifle them because they are severe, or because they are erroneous. As about no man was there more juggling mystification, so about no man ought there now to be plainer truth-telling. To clip—to garble—to conceal his sentiments upon others—unless with almost religious caution—is in reality to disguise his character—and again to delude the world.

Bulwer-Lytton clearly believes in a cosmopolitan artistic creation: the *Conversations* are a “trust...for the public,” and if not available for all, as arbiter of this knowledge he is culpable at attempting to “disguise [Byron's] character...delude the world.” A more skeptical viewpoint simply shows Bulwer-Lytton providing the public—a consumership rabidly fascinated by and avid consumers of genius—what they wanted; after all, the product the *NMM* magazine sold was a “middle ground between ‘elite’ culture and ‘mass’ culture, ‘genius’ and ‘the public,’ ‘Romantic’ and ‘Victorian’” (Higgins 7).

Bulwer-Lytton's connections with Byron—as a literary influence and competitor of sorts—ran deep. One biographer, Allan Christensen, quotes Bulwer-Lytton as saying Byron “bur[ied] in his grave a poetry of existence that can never be restored” (qtd. in Christensen 5). Christensen mentions that Bulwer-Lytton “fervently admired” the ““touching egotism”” in

Byron.<sup>11</sup> Another biographer, Leslie George Mitchell, characterizes Bulwer-Lytton as someone who, despite comparisons to Byron, claimed to dislike him and engaged in an analogous affair with a woman previously involved with Byron: Bulwer-Lytton resented being called “Childe Harold” (as friend Lady Cunningham-Fairlie frequently called him); he viewed Byron as “ ‘a coxcomb and a bit of a coward, very unamiable, very mean, very tyrannical, and in most matters very ignorant;’ and lastly, he had a “disastrous involvement” with the married Lady Caroline Lamb, a woman “whose scandalous affair with Byron still echoed through the London salons” (qtd. in Mitchell 13; Christensen 5). In an uncanny moment, Byron actually alludes—albeit in a roundabout way—to the affair in the *Conversations* (but for most readers it likely remains a blind item<sup>12</sup> through Bulwer-Lytton’s editorship): “Lady M — , who might have been my mother, excited an interest in my feelings that few young women have been able to awaken” (V 542). The unidentified is, of course, “Lady Melbourne,” mother-in-law of Caroline Lamb. The inclusion of a blind item like this could also reflect Bulwer-Lytton’s belief in gossip’s ability to reveal philosophy or inner character<sup>13</sup> (Darcy 300).

The *Conversations*’ publication in a magazine as opposed to book form might also be attributed to the primacy of the serial magazine as opposed to the printed book. Periodicals thrived on topical matter such as anecdotes, and their structure was better suited to variegated collections of short pieces than to sustained narratives. Cafarelli notes how readers adapted to print culture’s fragmented publication content: “The readiness and willingness of readers to

---

<sup>11</sup> A theme in Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *Falkland* (1827).

<sup>12</sup> A modern term that characterizes a gossip columnist’s description of a famous person’s actions but omits naming the person; the action is typically scandalous or morally questionable. The omission is due to lack of evidence and potential libel claims. The phenomenon of the blind item dates back to these literary magazines; Lady Blessington was the subject of many blind items in her day. As far as my research has suggested, a history of blind items has not yet been conducted, and is an opening for further scholarship.

<sup>13</sup> This comment is made in regards to Bulwer-Lytton’s attitude toward Isaac D’Israeli’s writing. Darcy believes D’Israeli to be a much-neglected writer of biography, and a precursor to psychological biography before such terms were available. A connection worth exploring is Benjamin Disraeli’s appearances in Blessington’s salons, and if his father’s work ever merited such discussion, especially in the presence of Bulwer-Lytton.

accept discontinuous narratives between covers as unified texts was a trait of the Romantic era....The prevalence of such narratives in Reviews and Magazines encouraged the acceptance of reading practices in nonfictional narrative that were already established in books of lyric poetry and in fictional texts” (6–7). The *Conversations*, which can seem repetitious in book form, were not written for such sustained reading; they are sketches intended to set off Byron’s mercurial character in part through their very lack of continuity.

The *Conversations* likely set off scandal among London society men and women since many of the subjects discussed still were living; cliffhangers and blind items were strategically placed at the ends of five of the *Conversations* (III–VI; X<sup>14</sup>). The blind items are made less in the name of discretion than they are for the sake of soliciting speculation, and in doing so, enticing future readership; placing a blind item or cliffhanger at the end of a serialized *Conversation* attempts to hook readers, to make them invested in the subsequent installment, and holds potential for further revelations.<sup>15</sup> In *Conversation* three, Byron and Blessington quarrel about an unnamed friend.<sup>16</sup> Although the ending for *Conversation* four is more vague, it also acts as a way to foreshadow additional content and revisits main themes of the *Conversations* (friendship, Byron’s “verbal incontinence”).<sup>17</sup> The blind item at the end of *Conversation* five proved difficult

---

<sup>14</sup> The blind item in *Conversation* ten is discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> A fairly new invention in narrative for nineteenth-century writers and readers which the serialized television form utilizes in much the same way. Ernest Lovell’s edited version of the 1834 *Conversations* fills in many of these blind items as footnotes.

<sup>16</sup> “Byron likes not contradiction, he waxed wroth to-day, because I defended a friend of mine whom he attacked, but ended by taking my hand, and saying he honoured me for the warmth with which I defended an absent friend, adding with irony, “Moreover, when he is not a poet, or even prose writer, by whom you can hope to be repaid by being handed down to posterity, as his defender.” (III 241)

<sup>17</sup> “This sensitiveness was visible on all occasions, and extended to all his relations with others; did his friends or associates become the objects of public attack, he shrunk from the association, or at least from any public display of it, disclaimed the existence of any particular intimacy, though in secret he felt good will to the persons. I have witnessed many examples of this, and became convinced that his friendship was much more likely to be retained by those who stood well in the world’s opinion, than by those who had even undeservedly forfeited it. I once made an observation to him on this point, which was elicited by something he had said of persons with whom I knew he had once been on terms of intimacy, and which he wished to disclaim; his reply was, ‘What the deuce good can I do them against public opinion? I shall only injure myself, and do them no service’.” (IV 319)

for Lovell to definitively identify, although he believes it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Landsdowne; the vagueness of the clue likely made it a troublesome blind item for contemporary readers.<sup>18</sup> The unnamed woman in the ending of the sixth *Conversation* is Lady Oxford, a conclusion that well-gossiped nineteenth century readers would have made as well<sup>19</sup> (Lovell 149).

As the *Conversations* trickled in, it became apparent that those previously believed to be in Byron's good graces emerged quite differently in the texts. Of course, in considering how conversations can act as both biography and autobiography, one cannot help wondering if Blessington (or Bulwer-Lytton, for reasons mentioned previously regarding his choosing to edit the *NMM*) didn't manipulate some of Byron's barbs in veiled retribution for her time in exile.<sup>20</sup>

Blessington's account of her time with Byron—along with her travel narratives *Idler in Italy* and *Idler in France*—was culled from journals, “undoubtedly...originally kept from day to day” (Sadleir 52). The published records of these journals are what survived;<sup>21</sup> we can only infer that the *Conversations* and *Idlers* were reworkings to maintain “discretion” as well as promote “saleability” (Sadleir 52). In other words, there is a manipulation of her journals that readers

---

<sup>18</sup>“Talking of Lord —, Byron observed that his success in life was a proof of the weight that fortune gave a man, and his popularity a certain sign of his mediocrity: “the first (said Byron) puts him out of the possibility of being suspected of mercenary motives; and the second precludes envy; yet you hear him praised at every side for his independence!—and a great merit it is truly (said he) in a man who has high rank and large fortune,—what can he want, and where could be the temptation to barter his principles since he already has all that people seek in such a traffic? No, I see no merit in Lord —’s independence; give me the man who is poor and untitled, with talents to excite temptation and honesty to resist it, and I will give him credit for independence of principle, because he deserves it. People (continued Byron) talk to you of Lord —’s high character,—in what does it consist? Why in being, as I before said, put by fortune and rank beyond the power of temptation,—having an even temper, thanks to a cool head and a colder heart!—and a mediocrity of talents that insures his being ‘content to live in decencies for ever,’ while it exempts him from exciting envy or jealousy, the followers of excellence.” (V 544)

<sup>19</sup> “I once (said Byron) found it necessary to call up all that could be said in favour of matured beauty, when my heart became captive to a *donna* of forty-six, who certainly excited as lively a passion in my breast as ever it has known; and even now the autumnal charms of Lady — are remembered by me with more than admiration. She resembled a landscape by Claude Lorraine (sic), with a setting sun, her beauties enhanced by the knowledge that they were shedding their last dying beams, which threw a radiance around. A woman (continued Byron) is only grateful for her *first* and *last* conquest. The first of poor dear Lady —’s was achieved before I entered on this world of care, but the last I do flatter myself was reserved for me, and a *bonne bouche* it was”. (VI 222)

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix A for Blessington's biography.

<sup>21</sup> As far as I can tell from my research, there are no extant copies of the editing work by Bulwer-Lytton of the *Conversations*.

must consider while reading (Sadleir 53). In “Self-Possession and Gender in Romantic Literary Biography,” Julian North comments on Blessington’s editorial work in the “selecting, positioning, reporting, and commenting on Byron’s works, but also in modifying and to a (debatably) large extent, fabricating them” (127). North’s footnote points readers to a passage in the *Conversations* in which Byron calls Lord Blessington kinder than Shelley; rather than fabrication, this seems more a case of Byron’s mercurial character. If we ought to come away with any insight about Byron after reading the *Conversations*, it is Blessington’s focus on Byron’s (somewhat) unintentional provocations and erratic behavior and opinions; the Blessington/Shelley comment could very well be reversed the following day.

Contemporary criticism of the *Conversations* seemed split: some considered the *Conversations* to be a true reflection of Byron’s character; others questioned Blessington’s ability for total recall, especially in the very lengthy passages of dialogue. Teresa Guiccioli, biographer and former mistress of Byron, seems to be the harshest of critics when implying that it is Lady Blessington’s “imaginative powers” to which the *Conversations* “must be attributed.” She continues,

They have been called imaginary, and so they are in fact, disclosing a secret feeling of resentment and uneasiness in the writer. One could not reasonably be persuaded, after all, that serious and sustained conversations may be conducted on horseback, riding along main roads in the company of seven or eight people, all of who are anxious to take part in the discussion and listen to Lord Byron’s remarks. Nor could one convince oneself that during four or five ceremonious dinners, where conversation is nearly always general and light-hearted, Lord Byron’s discourse could have provided enough material to fill two volumes. (542)



The *Monthly Review* chimes in to inquire, “in what school of erudition it was that the Countess acquired the extraordinary faculty which she possesses of remembering”<sup>22</sup> (98). As opposed to questioning Blessington’s “faculty” of recollection, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* picks at Blessington’s literary missteps and suggests Bulwer-Lytton provided more than editorial guidance: “the mere page of preface appended to the volume of *Conversations*, after Mr. Bulwer’s departure for Italy, contains more instance of false grammar, and of the memorable form of rhetoric commonly called Irish Bulls, than we ever saw collected in the same number of lines” (206).

Other publications were more sympathetic; *Fraser’s* commented that “since the publication of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, nothing of the kind so good as her *Conversations with Lord Byron* has appeared” with “their only fault arised from shewing his lordship always in his best bib and tucker, as if he had some innate apprehension that she saw through him” (267). The latter comment seems to attribute Blessington’s psychological acuity to Byron’s behavior while interacting with her. Despite these somewhat lukewarm reviews, the *Conversations* were immensely popular; shortly after the *Conversations* debuted in the *NMM*, they were republished in other British journals (*The Gentleman’s Magazine*, the *Mirror*), had traveled to America (in the *Hesperian*, *Carey’s Journal of Choice Literature*, *The Atheneum*, *Godey’s*), and were translated into French and Italian for serialization.

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Monthly Review*, 1834: “With all respect for the noble author of these *Conversations*, we may be permitted to inquire in what school of erudition it was that the Countess acquired the extraordinary faculty which she possesses of remembering. We have here some four hundred solid pages of choice conversation, in which a vast proportion is represented as having been spoken by Lord Byron: here and there we have whole pages which are stated to have been exactly delivered by his Lordship[...]. If the account of these speeches and conversations be strictly correct, then we can only admire Lady Blessington as the very pattern of a reporter, and we are sure that it is only the exalted circumstances in which she is placed that prevent her from being employed at this moment, on the invitation of some spirited proprietor of a morning paper, at an allowance of her choice.” (98)

Byron scholars and biographers have grown to value and respect the *Conversations*; in Lovell's edited collection, he makes note of the Byron scholars who have indicated the importance of the *Conversations* as an account of Byron. Without documenting all of Lovell's citations, there are a few that are worth pointing out.

In 1912 Miss Ethel C. Mayne, author of the then definitive (sic) biography of Lord Byron, set the twentieth century's tone of highly enthusiastic endorsement which Lady Blessington's *Conversations of Byron* has been accorded almost every (sic) since: 'There is no comparison between her book, as far as it goes, and any other except [John] Galt's for the early years.' She saw 'deep into his true nature.'

In 1930 André Maurois pronounced the *Conversations* to be 'one of the truest and most living books ever written about Byron...She has grasped him, in all his complexity, most admirably.'

Samuel C. Chew, writing in 1956 in *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research*, described her book as one of 'the two principal records of the poet's conversation,' the other being Thomas Medwin's.

Leslie A. Marchand, author of the definitive *Byron: A Biography* (1957), agreed: Lady Blessington's book, [was] a "shrewd contemporary interpretation." (3-5)

As a result, Blessington's *Conversations* are oft-cited by biographers, and passages pulled from the *Conversations* within recent biographies imply biographers' belief in their veracity; regarding printed conversations of Byron (and Coleridge), Richard Altick cautions they may be "at best only approximations of what they said and the way they said it," a caveat that every biographer likely brings into readings of these works (320-21). With Altick's caveat taken into account, the next section examines Blessington's work largely on its rhetorical strategies and

does not attempt to delineate whether it is truth or fiction. By removing that debate, the *Conversations*—in comparison to other accounts of Byron—attempts to engage with the Byron myth in a completely different fashion; instead of strictly reporting dialogue, Blessington provides eloquently stated insights to explain Byron's behavioral pattern.

### Chapter 3: Blessington, Kennedy, and Medwin Compared

In *Contesting Literary Biography in the Romantic Period: The Foreshadowing of Psychological Biography*, Jane Darcy examines debates surrounding the use of letters in Romantic biography. Epistolary exchanges were edited for publication to protect the privacy of the author; meanwhile, debates began regarding how much “truth” a letter could truly show about the author (296). This debate concerned how to best “understand the psychological dimension of a character,” a concept that had “no exact terminology” (ibid). What Darcy argues is that the debates about Romantic literary biography (is it an art? a science?) are misplaced; instead, behind these disagreements lies a larger issue—how biographers grappled at finding the “inner life” or “inner springs” of a writer (306).

As shown in section one, the increase in biographical materials concurrent with Blessington’s *Conversations* showed an insatiable public desire for an explanation of the “inner life” of celebrity; Bulwer-Lytton’s personal philosophies and politics associated with running the *NMM* extended to his publication of the *Conversations* (to expose Byron’s “true character”). My claim is that Blessington’s *Conversations* were unique in the way they attempted to explain the “inner workings” of Byron and went beyond both the public’s demands and Bulwer-Lytton’s personal philosophies; to the extent that it attempts to understand a person—Byron—the *Conversations*’ rhetorical strategies and topics anticipated psychological biography. As far as a working definition of “psychobiography,” I have chosen to adopt William Todd Schultz’s “hallmarks of good psychobiography” to avoid pitfalls of *defining* psychobiography; as outlined in his *Handbook of Psychobiography*<sup>23</sup> these are: cogency, narrative structure, comprehensiveness, convergence of evidence, sudden coherence, logical soundness, consistency,

---

<sup>23</sup> Schultz provides a table with characteristics for these on 7.

and viability. While it is impossible to hold Blessington's work up to all of these terms, especially since these apply to the comprehensive researched biography,<sup>24</sup> her *Conversations* approach these "hallmarks" better than comparable accounts of Byron. In order to examine how the *Conversations* approach psychobiography, I will examine how these "hallmarks" might loosely apply to the work. These are obviously a more modern conception informed by advanced in psychology; however, it is useful to have a set of conditions that allow us to see how Blessington's *Conversations* pointed in the direction of psychobiography, or, moving away from a strict account of events. First, I will explore the narrative structure used by Blessington in assembling the *Conversations*; I will then compare the way Blessington portrays Byron's views on "women and religion" and "vice and virtue" as compared to books in which James Kennedy and Thomas Medwin published their accounts of conversations with Byron in order to illuminate the *Conversations*' comprehensiveness, convergence of evidence to explain behavior, and ability to give coherence to otherwise incoherent behavior.

### ***Rhetorical Strategies: Organization and Discourse***

A closer look at the *Conversations* suggests that Blessington wrote installment-by-installment, as opposed to conceiving the work as a single volume, as she initially plays with several different rhetorical and organizational strategies to deliver biographical content. She begins by dating the first *Conversation* as "Genoa, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1823," giving the reader the sense of the content being a journal entry; she repeats a journal entry date on page 7 (April 2<sup>nd</sup>), but abandons these divisions by the second *Conversation*. The organization of the conversational content after the first *Conversation* no longer follows an obvious chronological organization, nor do the shifts in topics seem to be related to each other in apparent ways. Topics tend to be

---

<sup>24</sup> We need to refer to the discussion of the validity of the *Conversations* in the second section only; however, even if Blessington pulled from different sources and misquoted Byron, her interpretative data has been viewed by scholars as sound.

repeated; the most covered are friendship, love, death, celebrity, reputation, English society (versus Italian, Irish, or French; gossip), Byron's relationship to certain literary figures, Lady Byron, religion, Byron's health or diet, human nature, and Byron on his own character.

Short letters, exchanged between the Blessington camp and Byron during the Genoa stay, follow the two journal entries. These make up only three pages of the *Conversations*; their somewhat abrupt inclusion (a line of asterisks, indicating a break from the journalizing) is just as perplexing as the myriad and trivial topics covered. As a footnote indicates, the letters were originally published in Moore's *Life*; this suggests that the letters' reprinting acted as several things: 1) a "factual" documentation of Byron's association with the Blessingtons; 2) implication of the importance of these letters—and thus, Blessington's account—to Byron's biography; 3) a way for readers to compare Byron's voice to Blessington's record of his conversations; and 4) a temporal setting (April-May 1823).<sup>25</sup>

As far as style is concerned, the first *Conversation* relies largely on Blessington's insight and summary of conversations in the form of indirect discourse; unlike the practice in the other *Conversations* in which Byron's dialogue is reported, the first *Conversation* adheres to direct discourse with identifiers. These identifiers— "Byron said" or "Byron continued"—function as dramatic pauses. Blessington uses this tactic when the conversation turns to Madame de Staël:

Talking of literary women, Lord Byron said that Madame de Staël was certainly the cleverest, though not the most agreeable woman he had ever known. "She declaimed to you instead of conversing with you," said he, "never pausing except to take breath; and if

---

<sup>25</sup> Lovell notes that when Moore was assembling his *Life*, he had requested that Lady Blessington "sit down instantly and record for me, as only a woman can record, every particular of your acquaintance with Byron, from first to last." Lovell claims that Lady Blessington sent Moore a manuscript as well as copies of letters exchanged between the Blessington camp and Byron in Italy and between Lord Blessington and Byron, who were friends in their youth (97). This manuscript's existence or whereabouts is unknown. This also shows that the *Conversations* were in some form of transcript prior to their publication in the *NMM*.

during that interval a rejoinder was put in, it was evident that she did not attend to it, as she resumed the thread of her discourse as though it had been interrupted.” (15)

The first sentence acts as Blessington’s summary of the lead-in to Byron’s statement; when the quotation is inserted, the identifier “said he” allows the reader to pause and consider the revelatory and provocative quotation.

These rhetorical strategies—reporting Byron’s dialogue as summative indirect discourse or as dramatic direct discourse—are gradually abandoned; Blessington portrays the *Conversations* as verbatim transcription of Byron’s dialogue with minimal interjection. Beginning with the fourth *Conversation*, Blessington relies on parenthetical identifiers (“(said Byron)”, “(observed Byron)”) as opposed to identifiers in-between or after quotes. She also expands her commentary on Byron’s character, as opposed to her being an active participant in the conversation; this strategy allows her to take the evidence that Byron has shown through conversation—often through repeated instances of a topic (or, the “convergence of evidence”)—and offer the reader lengthy interpretations. These elucidations are a unique characteristic of her *Conversations* not found in Thomas Medwin’s or James Kennedy’s. In order to examine these differences, three themes that appear in all three Conversations will be explored: the authors’ introductions of Byron in the text; religion and women; and vice and society.

### ***Blessington/Medwin/Kennedy Compared***

As previously mentioned by Altick, Blessington was not alone in publishing a “conversation with Byron.” Perhaps the most comparable account Thomas Medwin’s *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (1824), often seen as an extension of the Boswellian biography. While Reed assesses the *Journal* as “unlively” compared to Boswell because Medwin “was much too interested in *what* Byron was saying to dramatize successfully the full force and the

give-and-take of a lively conversation,” at the same time, Reed barely comments on Blessington’s *Conversations*.<sup>26</sup> Other contemporary critics (and friends of Byron) “pilloried him for his inaccuracies” (Reed 10; Soderholm 141). James Kennedy’s *Conversations* are chiefly about religion, and when the conversation diverges, Kennedy steers it back into its path. According to Leslie Marchand, Byron’s conversations with Kennedy were “never rude or sharply sarcastic, but Kennedy was uneasy because he knew that the wits of the garrison were making sport of his efforts to convert Byron, who, it was apparent, did not take the humorless doctor too seriously, though he did not want to hurt his feelings” (420). Kennedy’s *Conversations* clearly show Byron’s knowledge of the Bible and contemporary Christian theology, but rarely probe beyond that of Byron’s religious knowledge.

### *Introductions*

Blessington’s introduction begins in a matter-of-fact tone: “Saw Lord Byron for the first time” (I 5). As she continues, she makes it clear that Byron’s physical appearance and conduct left something wanting: “The impression of the first few minutes disappointed me, as I had, both from the portraits and descriptions given, conceived a different air of him” (I 5). This is a rather bold statement, but it humanizes Byron by giving him flaws. She describes Byron’s “prepossessing” physicality by highlighting a flaw, but redeeming it.<sup>27</sup> She describes his appearance as “gentlemanlike,” but dwells on his ill-fitting “ready-made” clothes that are too large for his thin frame; he has a “perpetual consciousness of his lameness.” After describing his voice (“peculiarly agreeable, but effeminate”) and his manners (“flippancy...a total want of that natural self-possession and dignity which ought to characterise a man of birth and education”),

---

<sup>26</sup> Reed’s book, largely a product of his era, does not provide authority to any female-written biographies, and discredits biographical production in the early nineteenth century as inferior to that of the eighteenth century.

<sup>27</sup> Or perhaps vice versa: “the nose is large and well shaped, but, from being a little *too thick*, it looks better in profile than in front-face...I observed that even in his smile—and he smiles frequently—there is something of a scornful expression in his mouth that is evidently natural, and not, as many suppose, affected.” (I 5)



she begins to detail Byron's surroundings: the village itself, his chateau, followed by a record of a painting of his daughter, Ada. Blessington writes:

Observing that I remarked that of his daughter, he took it down, and seemed much gratified when I discovered the strong resemblance it bore to him. Whilst holding it in his hand, he said, "I am told she is clever—I hope not; and, above all, I hope she is not poetical; the price paid for such advantages, if advantages they be, is such as to make me pray that my child may escape them." (6)

Blessington reports a brief conversation that followed—on mutual friends Thomas Moore, Douglas Kinnaird, and Edward Ellice—before departing.

These opening three pages demonstrate Blessington's desire to ground the readers in a specific place accompanied by her initial—and not altogether complimentary—impressions of Byron. Byron and Blessington are beginning to become comfortable with one another; the summary of small-talk about mutual friends shows a common ground between them. Blessington does not praise or pander to Byron; her attention to Ada's painting acts less as sycophancy and more as a conversation starter (public placement of a child's picture could arguably act as an invitation to inquire on the child). When Blessington points to Byron's physical or material features (his deformed foot, his clothes, his smile, his manners, the use of oil in his graying hair), she suggests that the physical characteristics inform his behavioral traits.

Medwin's description of Byron's physical characteristics occur nearly in the same order as Blessington's<sup>28</sup> (his height, face, lips, chin, forehead, paleness, hair) followed by a critical eye ("in criticising his features it might, perhaps, be said that his eyes were placed too near his nose, and that one was rather smaller than the other") (13). He does not attempt to attribute, in the way

---

<sup>28</sup> This parallel is obvious, and likely one of the reasons charges of either plagiarism or fabrication were levied against Blessington.

Blessington does, Byron's psychology as rooted in, or being explicated by, his physicality. In contrast to Blessington, Medwin expresses his interest in meeting Byron, an arrangement made by his cousin and friend, Percy Bysshe Shelley; Blessington, meanwhile, remains aloof. This omission and attitude is deliberate; she had written in her journal: "desirous as I am to see 'Genoa the Superb' ...I confess that its being the residence of Lord Byron gives it a still greater attraction to me" (qtd. in Marchand 397). Blessington's detached descriptions of Byron fashion her as an objective, as opposed to interested, acquaintance.

Instead of an inviting and comfortable environment in which Blessington finds Byron, Medwin finds him accompanied by an eccentric equipage ("seven servants, five carriages, nine horses, a monkey, a bull-dog and a mastiff, two cats, three pea-fowls and some hens...all his books, consisting of a very large library of modern works...together with a vast quantity of furniture") in an aging, "haunted" chateau (Lanfranchi); Byron, guarded by a bull dog, holds court on the first floor (10–11). As Medwin enters, Byron hands Shelley a manuscript asking him to evaluate it and say what he "think[s] of it" (11). A more intimidating setting could hardly be imagined. It seems that both Blessington and Medwin, at these points, stay close to their journals; but as we see later, Blessington diverges, while Medwin remains static.

James Kennedy's first few pages of his *Conversations* are dedicated to reporting Byron's comings and goings on Cephalonia, all likely told to Kennedy second-hand. His language and attitude toward Byron is respectful: Kennedy refers to him as "his lordship." Byron's arrival to Cephalonia is documented as having caused a "great sensation" because of his "name, influence, talents, and fortune" as well rumors that surrounded him; a dinner with Byron marks his "affability and refinement of manners" a claim that seems to be backed up by his politeness in "not hurting Kennedy's feelings." When Kennedy has the chance to meet Byron after seven

fairly dense pages, it is clear the conversation's theme has been predetermined (Christian doctrine), but the tediously documented conditions of the meeting have proven exhausting to the reader. This, of course, is in contrast to the rather efficient use of structure employed by Blessington and Medwin. Such disparate methods of providing introductions of Byron by Blessington, Medwin, and Kennedy can be seen in the following two sections on "religion and women" and "vice and virtue."

### *Religion and Women*

Byron touches on the subject of religion at several times in the course of the *Conversations*; however, it is only twice that he comments on religion's effects on women. During the third *Conversation*, Byron discusses letters he received as a result of his celebrity; this "very different kind of letter" comes from a Mr. John Sheppard, whose recently deceased wife had written a prayer *for* Byron:

May the person to whom I allude...be awakened to his own danger, and led to seek that peace of mind in a proper sense of religion, which he has found this world's enjoyment unable to procure! Do Thou grant that his future example may be productive of far more extensive benefit than his past conduct and writings have been of evil. (231)

Byron clearly valued this letter, as it was dated (November 1821) over a year prior to his meeting with Blessington and shows him as a "skeptic" as opposed to "unbeliever." His earnestness about the Sheppard letter ought to be believed; according to Blessington, Byron has a "seriousness" in his manner "that impresses one with the truth of his statements" regarding religion (III 233). When Byron comments that "Mrs. Sheppard is mixed up with all my religious aspirations; nothing ever so excited by imagination, and touched by heart, as her prayer," Blessington realizes she has stumbled upon a subject that transcends a set of behaviors she had previously

attributed to Byron, whose volatility she described as follows: “‘the morrow comes!’ and he is no longer the same being” (III 235). Blessington believes that this “tender and affectionate heart” would be typical of Byron’s nature had not “circumstances soured it” (III 235).

Byron’s epistolary acquaintance with the Sheppards seems to have informed his attitude toward women and religion; in the tenth *Conversation*, Byron states

I should hate a woman who could laugh at or ridicule sentiment, as I should, and do, women who have not religious feelings; and, much as I dislike bigotry, I think it a thousand times more pardonable in a woman than irreligion...[Religion] inculcates mildness, forbearance, and charity, - those graces that adorn them more than others...But when I say that I admire religion in women, don’t fancy that I like sectarian ladies, distributors of tracts armed and ready for controversies, many of whom only preach religion, but do not practise it...Poor Mrs. Sheppard tried more, and did more, to reclaim me more than — —but no, as I have been preaching religion, I shall practise one of its tenets, and be charitable; so I shall not finish the sentence. (X 45-46)

Blessington’s closing comment, that Byron’s deep reflection “on the subject of religion and its duties, is, I hope, a step gained in the right path, in, which I trust he will continue to advance; and which step I attribute, as does he, to the effect the prayer of Mrs. Sheppard had on his mind, and which, it is evident, has made a lasting impression, by the frequency and seriousness with which he refers to it” ends the *Conversation* on a rather serious and somber tone (X 46). In a way, it allows reader a sense of closure, as it points to Byron’s last days and thoughts; by invoking religion and “charity,” he avoids gossip (the ending of the line “reclaim me more than — ” remains unuttered). Through this conversation about women and religion, Blessington assures readers of Byron’s introspective final year. Further, as Blessington’s comment regarding Byron’s

feelings toward religion comes near the end of the *Conversations*, it acts as explanation of data presented in the preceding pages.

Mrs. Sheppard's letter is the subject of a short exchange between Medwin and Byron, and the only place in Medwin in which "women and religion" is the subject; unlike Blessington's extremely reflective account, Medwin's account of Byron's relationship to the Sheppard letter is affected, but curt. This could be attributed to the somewhat novel nature of the recently delivered letter. Additionally, Medwin chooses to include this exchange in a grouping of "correspondents," as opposed to exercising editorial power to include it in a previous conversation on religion; from the brief conversation about religion Medwin concludes "it is difficult to judge, from the contradictory nature of his writings, what the religious opinions of Lord Byron really were" (74). This is a factual interpretation as to *why* he can't figure out Byron's religious opinions. An opinion regarding women and religion surely emerges from the Sheppard letter, as Byron states: "I like devotion in women. She must have been a divine creature. I pity the man who has lost her! I shall write to him by return of the courier, to console with him, and tell him that Mrs. S— need not have entertained any concern for my spiritual affairs, for that no man is more of a Christian than I am, whatever my writings may have led her and others to suspect" (82-83). Byron's statement, that he "likes devotion in women" deserves further probing, which Medwin does not offer; this would have allowed clarification on the "contradictory nature" of his "religious opinions."

As mentioned in the previous section, James Kennedy's entire set of conversations is on religion and only once does the conversation turn "on the comparative number of men and women who believed," a shift precipitated by Byron. Byron's comments on the subject are paraphrased as opposed to directly quoted: "His lordship remarked, that women were naturally

devout, when the passions of youth, and feeling of love, which is a principal object of their life, are exhausted; and that when they do love their Saviour, they are accused of retaining a mixture of their earthly love, blended with purer feelings, in their devotion” (44). Although the subsequent exchange (direction of the conversation to historian Edward Gibbon) could arguably show Kennedy’s lack of inquisitiveness about Byron’s beliefs and his own interest in opining, also shows his desire to produce a record of what was said *without* psychological interpretation; further, it seems Kennedy is inclined to take Byron’s comments at face value.

### *Vice/Virtue*

Kennedy’s conversation with Byron on vice and virtue is framed around Kennedy’s reading of *Don Juan*; however, as the conversation continues, it becomes apparent that Kennedy hasn’t even read *Don Juan*, instead relying on extracts in reviews to inform his “understanding” of the texts.<sup>29</sup> Kennedy’s position is that Byron, in exposing vice on all levels on society, seems to have done a disservice to his readership by “shewing them what they are” as opposed to “not [having] shewn them what to do.” In other words, Kennedy wants didacticism. Byron responds to Kennedy’s objections by explaining that his intentions to “take a vicious and unprincipled character, and lead him through those ranks of society, whose high external accomplishments cover and cloke internal and secret vice” have largely been misunderstood. Kennedy continues to protest, trying to convince Byron that scenes of “vice and folly” ought to be accompanied by a demonstration of reform; Byron insists that, in showing scenes of depravity, “the human heart is corrupted,” a fact about human nature which should make it easier for Kennedy and his fellow evangelical ministers “to throw in doctrine with more effect.” Kennedy rephrases his questions, but asks the same thing with each iteration; he does not push Byron to examine *why* he chose to

---

<sup>29</sup> One can’t help but reminded of similar criticisms levied against “immoral” modern music, film, or literature by those that haven’t listened to, viewed, or read the actual texts.

highlight scenes of vice in the way Blessington might (examination of treatment in society, reflection of specific incidences and responses). Kennedy's way to end the conversation?—"the best way...of remedying this is, for your lordship to study Christianity." Readers were likely surprised upon reading Kennedy's *Conversations*, for they showed Byron's knowledge of religion and respect for truly religious people; but it seems we receive no insight on the satire in *Don Juan*, the working of the "inner man" who constructed the work.

In the final pages of his book, Medwin's account of Byron's attitude toward virtue and vice shows his appreciation and respect for the poet; in a way, Byron's moniker as being in the "Satanic School of Poetry" is only perpetuated by the ill-informed like Kennedy (276). Medwin does not address this subject in a conversational form, but interprets Byron's attitudes through their interactions and his poetry; he believes "no man respected more the liberty from which the social virtues emanate...no writings ever tended more to exalt and ennoble the dignity of man and of human nature" (276). Medwin clearly points to Byron's autobiography and psychological reaction to explain his poetry, as he begins with a statement regarding Byron's best works, following with claims about Byron's "generous action," "indignation," "defiance of personality," and "strength with oppression" (276-77).

For unspecified reasons, *Don Juan* was an "off limits" subject for Blessington and Byron, an absence requested by Blessington as opposed to Byron; he mentions it only two-three times during the *Conversations*, and it is usually in regards to Guiccioli's responses (X 45). Blessington provides much insight into Byron's own internal conflicts with virtue and vice, concluding in the final *Conversation* that he "thought long and profoundly on man and his vices" (XI 421). Byron believed that "a knowledge of vice will, as far as I can judge by experience, invariably produce disgust" and quotes Pope to further elucidate his point (X 34). He seems to

want the contradiction of “vices of the rich and great called errors, and those of the poor and lowly only crimes” to justify his work; Blessington sees this claim as dubious, as she responds:

When we dwell on vices with mockery and bitterness, instead of pity, we may doubt the efficacy of our contemplation; and this...seems to me to be your case; for when I hear your taunting reflections on the discoveries you make in poor, erring human nature; when you have explored every secret recess of the heart, you appear to me like a fallen angel, sneering at the sins of men, instead of a fellow man pitying them. This it is that makes me think you analyze too deeply; and I would at present lead you to reflect only on the good that still remains in the world—for be assured there is much good, as an antidote to the evil that you know of. (IX 311–12)

Exploring Byron’s view on vices is so crucially important because many confuse Byron’s attitudes with those in *Don Juan*; Byron admits to “[having] represented Vice under alluring forms...[but] that I always took care to represent the votaries of vice as unhappy themselves, and entailing unhappiness on those that loved them” (I 18). Perhaps Blessington’s most insightful comment about this subject is in the first *Conversation*, just after the previous quotation. In many ways, this comment speaks to Blessington’s concern with what Byron does say as what he *doesn’t*; that is, Blessington seeks to give readers a sense of Byron’s internal machinations that might difficult to be conveyed as a conversation. Regarding Byron’s new “addition” (avarice) to an already established list of vices, Blessington observes

This new vice, like all the others he attributes to himself, he talks of as one would name those of an acquaintance, in a sort of deprecating, yet half mocking tone; as much as to say, you see I know all my faults better than you do, though I don’t choose to correct them: indeed, it has often occurred to me, that he brings forward his defects, as if in



anticipation of some one else exposing them, which he would not like; as, though he affects the contrary, he is jealous of being found fault with, and shows it in a thousand ways. (I 19)

Blessington demonstrates attention to subtle clues as essential to understanding Byron's psychology; she attributes his outward manifestations and identifications of one's own faults "as if in anticipation of some one else exploring them."

### ***Conclusion***

Perhaps it is unfair to compare Blessington's book to two works so drastically different from it; Kennedy, after all, attempts religious conversation, and Medwin becomes a very close friend of Byron's. Medwin provides readers a record of conversations instead of interpretive suggestions for Byron's behavior; by producing the conversations with few interjections or interpretive work, he also suggests that these are unmitigated truths, much as the letters-as-biography purported to do. Kennedy's work is focused on a singular theme, and he attempts "diagnosis" of Byron. At the same time, it is wholly fair to hold these works up to Blessington's as doing so helps to explain how different Blessington's work is and *why* it is important to the Byron legend. Schultz's "hallmarks" of good psychobiography can be seen in the categories explored in the three previous thematic explorations. Blessington's rhetorical strategies set up her work to be persuasive; that is, she is not interested in convincing us to like or dislike Byron, but in persuading readers to accept her suggestions of Byron's behavior based on the overwhelming amount of evidence she provides. She revisits themes, such as the exploration of vice and virtue, and incorporates her objections to Byron within the dialogue; instead of being frustrated—as is Kennedy—or left confused—as is Medwin—regarding Byron's views on religion, she broaches the subject repeatedly; by using a specific instance—Mrs. Sheppard's

letter—Blessington attempts to account for multiple aspects of Byron’s behavior (interactions with fan mail, celebrity status, religion, religion and women).

Of course, there are limits to exploring Blessington’s work strictly on the basis of its being *psychobiography*, the most obvious being the reductive temptation to see Byron’s work as a manifestation of inner-turmoil; Byron is clearly not *Don Juan* or *Childe Harold* for Blessington, and comparing him to his work is not her goal. Claims of plagiarism, fabrication, or monetary gain are not relevant to the discussion of the *Conversations*’ narrative structure, an invention wholly original to the canon of primary biographical documents on Byron. Further, as mentioned previously, such attempts at fitting Blessington’s *Conversations* into the mold of modern psychobiographical conditions are difficult; although workings of “inner man” were being explored outside of the non-fiction arena at the time Blessington published, establishment of psychology as a field was yet to come. Blessington’s *Conversations* should be viewed as advancement in the field of biography, and especially in the publication of conversations, through her resistance to using straightforward journalizing and reliance on perceptive interpretation.

## **Appendix A: Biography of Lady Blessington**

Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington, was born Margaret (“Sally”) Power in Ireland in 1789 to Edmund (“Beau”) Power and Ellen Power in Knockbrit, Ireland. Her childhood was tumultuous; her father, Beau Power, was a servant of the crown, a “bulwark of the pro-English and anti-Catholic aristocracy” (Sadleir 6). Blessington’s biographers imply Beau Power would take advantage of whatever necessary for financial gain; he supposedly sold Margaret into a marriage with Captain Farmer of the British Army when she was 15. Sadleir characterized Farmer as a “sadistic brute” (7). Margaret returned home shortly afterwards, after three months of marriage, never to return to her husband.

The next three months of her life are not well-documented, but it is understood she had suitors (one of whom was Lord Mountjoy, later the Earl of Blessington) and a long-lasting companionship with Captain Thomas Jenkins, an Englishman, begun in 1806. In 1807, after an unprovoked shooting of an innocent boy, Beau Power was released from duty, resulting in his own personal unraveling; Margaret found comfort with Jenkins, and, although still married to Farmer, took up residence with him in Dublin in 1807, and later, at his estate in Hampshire.

Although Jenkins and Margaret were never married, their co-habitation lasted for nearly ten years, during which time “she gradually developed a brilliance and charm of conversation, a power of putting others at their ease and inviting their confidence, which remained her outstanding characteristics, and were the secrets of her success as hostess and as ruler of a *salon*” (Sadleir 11). Margaret and Jenkins’ union ended just after their 1816 stay at Mountjoy Forest, Ireland, the Earl of Blessington’s estate; later that year, Margaret Farmer moved to Blessington’s London house with £10,000 paid to Jenkins. Blessington's biographers suggest the sum was for one (or a combination of) the following reasons: 1) in payment for the clothes and jewels that

Margaret took with her; and 2) in payment of Jenkins' gambling debts (a claim suggested by Sadleir). In 1818, an accident took the life of Margaret's husband, Captain Farmer, leaving her free to marry the widower Blessington.

They moved to 10 St. James Square in London; although the Earl renovated the Ireland Estate, it gradually became clear that Margaret, now Marguerite, had no intention of returning. London became her home off and on during the subsequent thirty years. At the St. James Square house, Lady Blessington established her salon, known for "lavish entertainment and distinguished conversation" (Sadleir 28). Notable—and regular—guests—of the St. James days included Joseph Jekyll, Samuel Parr, Thomas Moore, John Galt, Lord Palmerston, Earl Grey, among many others. In 1821, Alfred, Comte d'Orsay visited the salon, resulting in his addition to the Blessington household—and family—until Lady Blessington's death. The sexual nature of their relationship remained something of a mystery; while many held that Lady Blessington and d'Orsay were lovers, d'Orsay's life as the "complete dandy" would have meant that ladies were of no interest to him; further, others maintain that Lady Blessington's relationships with Jenkins and Lord Blessington were non-physical, likely a result of her early experiences with her first husband, and that her involvement with d'Orsay followed this pattern.

1822 was an eventful year for Lady Blessington; she published her first novel, *The Magic Lantern or Sketches of Scenes in the Metropolis*, and the "Blessington Circus" took to the continent for an eight-year tour, making stops in Paris, Florence, Nice, Avignon, and Grenoble, among many other cities; it is the nine weeks spent in Genoa that would form the material for her *Conversations with Lord Byron*. It was only Lord Blessington's death, in 1829, which would necessitate a permanent return to London.

During the continental trip, Lord Blessington's only legitimate daughter—Harriet Gardiner—was married to d'Orsay for reasons that could have only been financial; d'Orsay's personal income didn't cover his extravagant lifestyle, and a marriage would make his inclusion in the Blessington circus legal and make his finances solvent. Blessington had no legitimate heirs; he married his first wife, Mary Campbell Brown, after she had given birth to a son (Charles) and a daughter (Emilie Rosalie, or, Mary) out of wedlock, and prior to her death in 1814, she had given birth to a daughter (Harriet) and a son (Luke, who died at the age of ten). Comte d'Orsay could have filled the role of a legitimate heir of sorts. Further, the extravagant Continental trip and Blessington's renovations to Mountjoy Forest had diminished his yearly income. When Blessington's will was read, a "sorry tale of mortgages, debts, falling rentals and general decay" emerged; we should also take into account the tens of thousands of pounds spent on renovations of a Parisian apartment and the money-hemorrhaging travel party that was the Blessington Circus. Marguerite's inheritance was £2,000 per year and the St. James House, clearly much less than Blessington had provided her while living (at an income of £30,000 a year, initially), and less than Marguerite's stepdaughter, Harriet (£5,000 per year); meanwhile, D'Orsay was left an annual sum, provided he stayed married to Harriet, and Harriet's income was the revenue from Blessington's Dublin estates. Marguerite had a clear monetary incentive to keep Harriet and D'Orsay married and living in her house.

Their return to London was marked with scandal—whispers of the Blessington-D'Orsay relationship swept through salons, while newspapers printed easily identifiable blind items. Lady Blessington still managed to create a prominent salon, one that competed with those of Lady Holland's, Lady Charleville's, and Lady Cork's, at a new residence in Seamore Place. But just as quickly as the salon was established, Lady Blessington's life was met with scandal yet again; the

breakup of Harriet Gardiner-D'Orsay's marriage (exact causes unknown, but all of the following have been suggested: Harriet left the household; Harriet had an affair; the marriage was loveless; Harriet felt she was being used) and a lawsuit filed against Lady Blessington by Charles Gardiner, the illegitimate son of Lord Blessington, contesting the will. It is also certain that Lady Blessington's income was not sufficient for her salon to continue as it was, given Harriet's departure; Sadleir writes that, at the end of 1831, "the old life of spontaneous gaiety and unself-conscious merriment was over. In their place must reign graciousness, social tact and, above all, sympathy toward those to whom fate had been unkind" (160).

This shift in fortune, therefore, being both social and monetary, led Blessington to pursue a career as an authoress. The *Conversations with Lord Byron* emerged in eleven installments in the *New Monthly Magazine* from 1832-1833. She quickly followed up with a three-volume novel—*Grace Cassidy, or, The Repealers* (1833)—a "political" work that "deliver[s] a complex message, challenging the social mores of her day and the current understanding of Irish identity formation in our own" (O'Dwyer 36). Perhaps more importantly, the contemporary response was "on the whole good." (Sadleir 179) She began to take on editorships of fashion annuals (*The Book of Beauty, The Keepsake*) as well as acting as a regular contributor to many others. She published several works of fiction and is credited with the first "governess" book, her 1839 novel *The Governess*.

After her lease lapsed at Seamore Place, Lady Blessington moved into Gore House, her final London move, under the excuse of wanting to be away from the hubbub and to conserve money; however, she may have moved because of Seamore Place's high rent, which Madden believes to "not have been less than £4000" (her yearly inheritance was only £2000). Her Gore House salons showed more "gravity and formality in her *conversazioni* than there had went to

be, and the conversation generally was no longer of that gay, enlivening, cheerful character, abounding in drollery and humor” as had in the past (Madden 158). Friends and family turned to her for aid, and she never refused; D’Orsay eventually moved in, chased by his creditors. She couldn’t publish without putting money up first; the promising career as “Society Correspondent” for the *Daily News* with Charles Dickens (a friend and frequent visitor to Gore House) at the helm ended after Dickens’ departure from the editorship (a three-week tenure) and her contract expiration (six months) (Sadleir 236).

The expenditure, in the end, was too much. After a creditor was accidentally allowed in the house in April 1849, Gore House and its contents were put up for sale in May of 1849. The sale was humiliating for Blessington; attendance consisted of legitimate buyers as well as curious onlookers. In the end, the sale paid all her debts, and she was left with £1500 as well as her yearly stipend. She moved house—along with her nieces and D’Orsay—to Paris in April. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, after a sudden onset of ‘difficulty of breathing,’ Lady Blessington died, with her last words, “Qu’elle [*sic*] heure est-il?” (Madden 184-185). She was buried in St. Germain, France, with a monument displaying inscriptions by Barry Cornwall and Walter Savage Landor.

## Appendix B: A Narrative of the TEI Transcription Process

The *Conversations with Lord Byron* project was initiated in my Digital Humanities class in Spring 2009 in Virginia Tech's English Department; coding in both XML and TEI were taught, which I extended to pursue working on a TEI version of Lady Blessington's *Conversations with Lord Byron* to be added to the *Life and Times of Lord Byron* archive.<sup>30</sup>

Although the bulk of this thesis addresses material relatively unconnected to the TEI transcription, I felt that my work on the transcription ought to be represented at some point in the thesis; this Appendix provides a brief overview of the TEI transcription process.

My first consideration was regarding which version to code. The *Conversations* were initially published in eleven installments in the *New Monthly Magazine (NMM)* from 1832–33; in 1834, the *Conversations* were published as a book, without indication of their serialization. There have been subsequent reprints, the most informative in Ernest J. Lovell's prefaced and footnoted edition in 1969. Working on the original edition in the *New Monthly Magazine* allowed me to engage in slightly more complicated coding and with a more interesting historical and cultural context.<sup>31</sup>

The original texts exist as microfiche in the Virginia Tech Newman Library; scanning the documents allowed me to have portable copies and to attempt Optical Character Recognition (OCR) with Adobe Professional. Unfortunately, because of the relatively noisy scans,<sup>32</sup> I was unable to render clean text. Dr. Radcliffe and I managed to locate copies through Google Books with OCR'd text-only versions available to download; some of the *NMM* scans available were

---

<sup>30</sup> The original thesis proposal included R. R. Madden's edited collection of Lady Blessington's memoirs. At the time of this publication (April, 2010), the *Conversations* are available online; I have not commenced work on the *Memoirs*. Therefore, the content of this thesis draft concerns my work on the *Conversations* only.

<sup>31</sup> These issues are addressed in the second section of this thesis.

<sup>32</sup> From what I understand, the images used for the *NMM* provided to libraries as microfiche are notoriously inconsistent in quality.



American versions, which resulted in my having to proofread for shifting grammar and word choice from their British counterparts. A few installments were either completely missing or had poor scans; I ended up simply typing these into a text editor.

After I had text-only editions of all of the *NMM* installments, I proofread the text against the scans. The OCR conversion is not perfect and is even less accurate when dealing with older printed documents that have bleeding print, foreign characters, and paper deterioration. The OCR copies from Google Scholar had paragraph breaks after every line; repeated attempts to use a find/replace function failed, which meant I ended up correcting every line by hand. Common errors I found while proofing the *NMM* pages were: missing or incorrect punctuation; misspelled foreign words without accents; and spacing issues. After I had completed all proofreading of all installments, I moved on to coding the documents in Oxygen.

While coding the documents, I ran into several issues—both philosophical and technical—that were resolved through discussion with Dr. Radcliffe; a short list includes: page numeration; paragraph numeration; how to handle correspondence; how to insert quote tags; handling typos within the original text; hierarchy of tags; how to handle anglicized foreign words; tagging titles of works that referred to a name; identifying fictional characters; and tagging blind items.

It was difficult to set a pace or order while coding. I wanted to get in at once all block elements and tags; however, after I turned in my first set of Conversations (Nos. 1–3) to Radcliffe, he suggested working on the block elements first (paragraph divisions, ids) followed by name elements, italics, diacritical marks, and so forth. As I was still getting my bearings with Oxygen, I was not keeping my document well-formed at all times. Before I turned in my second set of Conversations (Nos. 4–11), I proofed every conversation to correct all errors, ensuring all

documents were well-formed before turning in. The rhythm I adapted for coding, as well as my increased familiarity with Oxygen, resulted in cleaner and more accurate documents.

As I went along with coding, I maintained at all times a running list of frequently used Unicode characters in an open text document; as the *Conversations* use many foreign words, the foreign characters took longer to fill in, as they couldn't be inserted using find/replace. Time spent on the TEI portion amounted to around 100+ hours (scanning the *NMM*, typing in the two–three copies unavailable via OCR, Proofreading, and Coding).

## Works Cited

Altick, Richard. *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America*.

New York: Knopf, 1965. Print.

Blessington, Marguerite. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. I" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1

July 1832: 5–23. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. II" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 August 1832: 129–

46. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. III" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 September 1832:

228–41. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. IV" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 October 1832: 305–

19. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. V" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 December 1832:

521–44. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. VI" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 February 1833:

214–22. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. VII" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 March 1833: 308–

18. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. VIII" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 June 1833: 143–

53. Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. IX" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 July 1833: 305–15.

Print.

---. "Conversations with Lord Byron No. X" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 September 1833:

33–46. Print.

- . "Conversations with Lord Byron No. XI" *The New Monthly Magazine*. 1 December 1833: 414–22. Print.
- Blessington, Marguerite, Ernest James Lovell, and George Gordon Byron. *Conversations of Lord Byron*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969. Print.
- Boswell, James. *Life of Samuel Johnson, 1791*. *Google Books*. Web. 7 Feb. 2010.
- Browning, J. D. *Biography in the 18th Century*. New York: Garland, 1980. Print.
- Cafarelli, Annette. *Prose In the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990. Print.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Volume Four*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1899.
- Christensen, Allan Conrad. *Edward Bulwer-Lytton: The Fiction of New Regions*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1976. Print.
- Clifford, James L. "Introduction." *Bowell's Life of Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. James L. Clifford. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970. Print.
- "Conversations with Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington." Review. *The Monthly Review* January 1834: 97–109. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- Darcy, Jane. "Contesting Literary Biography in the Romantic Period: The Foreshadowing of Psychological Biography." *Literature Compass* 5.2 (2008): 292–309. *ProjectMUSE*. Web. 1 March 2010.
- "The Duchess d'Abrantes and the Countess of Blessington." *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* April 1834: 204–6. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- "Gallery of Literary Characters: Countess of Blessington." *Fraser's* March 1833: 267. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.

- Gittings, Robert. *The Nature of Biography*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1978. Print.
- Guiccioli, Teresa. *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*. Trans. Michael Rees. Ed. Peter Cochran. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005. Print.
- Hamilton, Nigel. *Biography: A Brief History*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.
- Higgins, David. *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- "The *Idler in Italy*. By the Countess of Blessington." *The Hesperian* July 1839: 129. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- Kendall, Paul Murray. *The Art of Biography*. Norton: Toronto, 1967. Print.
- Kennedy, James. *Conversations on Religion, with Lord Byron and Others*, 1833. *Google Books*. Web. 1 March 2010.
- Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- Lockhart, John Gibson. *Life of Robert Burns*. 1830. *Google Books*. Web. 4 Feb. 2010.
- Lockhart, John Gibson. *Life of Walter Scott*. 1839. *Google Books*. Web. 18 April 2010.
- Longaker, John Mark. *English Biography in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Octagon, 1971. Print.
- Madden, Richard Robert. *The Literary Life and Correspondence of the Countess of Blessington*. New York: Harper, 1855. Print.
- Medwin, Thomas. *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron*. London: Colburn, 1824. *Life and Times of Lord Byron*. Web. 1 March 2010.
- Mitchell, Leslie George. *Bulwer-Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a British Man of Letters*. London: Hambledon and London, 2003.
- North, Julian. "Self-Possession and Gender in Romantic Literary Biography." *Romantic*

- Biography*. Ed. Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes. Aldershot: Aldgate, 2003. Print.
- O'Dwyer, Riana. "Travels of a Lady of Fashion: The Literary Career of Lady Blessington (1789–1849)." *New Contexts: Re-Framing Nineteenth-Century Irish Women's Prose*. Ed. Heidi Hansson. Cork: Cork UP, 2008. Print.
- Parker, Mark. *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.
- Patmore, Peter George. "Personal Recollections of the Late Lady Blessington." *Bentley's Miscellany*, 1849: 162–75. *Google Books*. 11 March 2010.
- Pite, Ralph. "Writing Biography that is not Romantic." *Romantic Biography*. Ed. Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes. Aldershot: Aldgate, 2003. Print.
- Reed, Joseph W. *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century: 1801–1838*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1966. Print.
- Roper, William. *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, 1822. *Google Books*. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Sadleir, Michael. *The Strange Life of Lady Blessington*. New York: Farrar, Straus, 1947. Print.
- Schultz, William Todd. *Handbook of Psychobiography*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Selden, John. *Table Talk: Being the Discourses of John Selden, Esq*, 1716. Ed. Richard Milward. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- Soderholm, James. *Fantasy, Forgery, and the Byron legend*. Lexington: UP Kentucky, 1996. Print.
- Stanfield, James. *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography*. Sunderland: George Garbutt, 1813. *Google Books*. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.
- Stauffer, Donald. *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941.

- Sweet, Nanora. "The *New Monthly Magazine* and the Liberalism of the 1820s." *Prose Studies* 25.1 (2002): 147–62. *InformaWorld*. Web. 4 March 2010.
- Throsby, Corin. "Byron, Commonplacings, and Early Fan Culture." *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750–1850*. Ed. Tom Mole. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.
- Todd, Janet M. "The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft." *Signs*. 1.3 (1976): 721–34. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 April 2010.
- Vidal, Mary. *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth- Century France*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992. Print.
- Walton, Izaak. *The Life of George Herbert, 1670*. *Google Books*. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Wu, Duncan. *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.