

LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF “MY
GRANDMOTHER’S REVIEW.”^{1*}

TO THE EDITOR OF THE BRITISH REVIEW.

MY DEAR ROBERTS,

As a believer in the Church of England—to say nothing of the State—I have been an occasional reader, and great admirer of, though not a subscriber to, your Review, which is rather expensive. But I do not know that any part of its contents ever gave me much surprise till the eleventh article of your twenty-seventh number made its appearance. You have there most vigorously refuted a calumnious accusation of bribery and corruption,² the credence of which in the public mind might not only have damaged your reputation as a barrister and an editor, but, what would have been still worse, have injured the circulation of your journal; which, I regret to hear, is not so extensive as the “purity (as you well observe) of its,”³ &c. &c. and the present taste for propriety, would induce us to expect. The charge itself is of a solemn nature, and, although in verse, is couched in terms of such circumstantial gravity, as to induce a belief little short of that generally accorded to the thirty-nine articles,⁴ to which you so frankly subscribed on taking your degrees. It is a charge the most revolting to the heart of man, from its frequent occurrence; to the mind of a lawyer, from its occa-

* Author: Lord Byron / Transcribed and annotated by Gioia Angeletti.

sional truth; and to the soul of an editor, from its moral impossibility. You are charged then in the last line of one octave stanza, and the whole eight lines of the next, viz. 209th and 210th of the first canto of that “pestilent poem,”⁵ Don Juan,⁶ with receiving, and still more foolishly acknowledging the receipt of, certain monies,⁷ to eulogize the unknown author, who by this account must be known to you, if to nobody else. An impeachment of this nature, so seriously made, there is but one way of refuting; and it is my firm persuasion, that whether you did or did not (and *I* believe that you did not) receive the said monies, of which I wish that he had specified the sum, you are quite right in denying all knowledge of the transaction. If charges of this nefarious description are to go forth, sanctioned by all the solemnity of circumstance, and guaranteed by the veracity of verse (as Counsellor Phillips⁸ would say) what is to become of readers hitherto implicitly confident in the not less veracious prose of our critical journals? what is to become of the reviews? And, if the reviews fail, what is to become of the editors? It is common cause, and you have done well to sound the alarm. I myself, in my humble sphere, will be one of your echoes. In the words of the tragedian Liston,⁹ “I love a row,”¹⁰ and you seem justly determined to make one.

It is barely possible, certainly improbable, that the writer might have been in jest; but this only aggravates his crime. A joke, the proverb says, “breaks no bones;” but it may break a bookseller, or it may be the cause of bones being broken. The jest is but a bad one at the best for the author, and might have been a still worse one for you, if your copious contradiction did not certify to all whom it may concern your own indignant innocence, and the immaculate purity of the British Review. I do not doubt your word, my dear Roberts,

yet I cannot help wishing that in a case of such vital importance, it had assumed the more substantial shape of an affidavit¹¹ sworn before the Lord Mayor.¹²

I am sure, my dear Roberts, that you will take these observations of mine in good part; they are written in a spirit of friendship not less pure than your own editorial integrity. I have always admired you; and not knowing any shape which friendship and admiration can assume more agreeable and useful than that of good advice, I shall continue my lucubrations, mixed with here and there a monitory hint as to what I conceive to be the line you should pursue, in case you should ever again be assailed with bribes, or accused of taking them. By the way, you don't say much about the poem, except that it is "flagitious."¹³ This is a pity—you should have cut it up; because, to say the truth, in not doing so, you somewhat assist any notions which the malignant might entertain on the score of the anonymous asseveration which has made you so angry.

You say, no bookseller "was willing to take upon himself the publication, though most of them disgrace themselves by selling it."¹⁴ Now, my dear friend, though we all know that those fellows will do any thing for money, methinks the disgrace is more with the purchasers; and some such, doubtless, there are, for there can be no very extensive selling (as you will perceive by that of the *British Review*) without buying. You then add, "what can the critic say?" I am sure I don't know; at present he says very little, and that not much to the purpose. Then comes, "for praise, as far as regards *the poetry*, many passages might be exhibited; for condemnation, as far as regards the morality, all." Now, my dear good Roberts, I feel for you and for your reputation; my heart bleeds for both; and I do ask you, whether or not such language does not come positively under the

description of “the puff collusive,” for which see Sheridan’s farce of “The Critic”¹⁵ (by the way, a little more facetious than your own farce under the same title) towards the close of scene second, act the first.

The poem is, it seems, sold as the work of Lord Byron; but you feel yourself “at liberty to suppose it not Lord B.’s “composition.” Why did you ever suppose that it was? I approve of your indignation—I applaud it—I feel as angry as you can; but perhaps your virtuous wrath carries you a little too far, when you say that “no misdemeanour, not even “that of sending into the world obscene and blasphemous “poetry, the product of studious lewdness and laboured impiety, appears to you in so detestable a light as the acceptance of a present by the editor of a review, as the “condition of praising an author.” The devil it doesn’t!—Think a little. This is being critical overmuch. In point of Gentile benevolence or Christian charity, it were surely less criminal to praise for a bribe, than to abuse a fellow creature for nothing; and as to the assertion of the comparative innocence of blasphemy and obscenity, confronted with an editor’s “acceptance of a present,”¹⁶ I shall merely observe, that as an editor you say very well, but as a Christian barrister, I would not recommend you to transplant this sentence into a brief.

And yet you say, “the miserable man (for miserable he is, “as having a soul of which he cannot get rid”)—But here I must pause again, and inquire what is the meaning of this parenthesis. We have heard of people of “little soul,” or of “no soul at all,” but never till now of “the misery of having “a soul of which we cannot get rid;”¹⁷ a misery under which you are possibly no great sufferer, having got rid apparently of some of the intellectual part of your own when you penned this pretty piece of eloquence.

But to continue. You call upon Lord Byron, always supposing him *not* the author, to disclaim "with all gentlemanly haste," &c. &c. I am told that Lord B. is in a foreign country, some thousand miles off it may be; so that it will be difficult for him to hurry to your wishes. In the mean time, perhaps you yourself have set an example of more haste than gentility; but "the more haste the worse speed."

Let us now look at the charge itself, my dear Roberts, which appears to me to be in some degree not quite explicitly worded:

"I bribed my *Grandmother's Review*, the British."¹⁸

I recollect hearing, soon after the publication, this subject discussed at the tea-table of Mr. S. the poet¹⁹, who expressed himself, I remember, a good deal surprised that you had never reviewed his epic poem, nor any of his six tragedies, of which, in one instance, the bad taste of the pit, and in all the rest, the barbarous repugnance of the principal actors, prevented the performance. Mrs. and the Misses S. being in a corner of the room perusing the proof sheets of some new poems on Italy (I wish, by the by, Mrs. S. would make the tea a little stronger) the male part of the *conversazione*²⁰ were at liberty to make a few observations on the poem and passage in question, and there was a difference of opinion. Some thought the allusion was to the "British Critic;" others, that by the expression, "my Grandmother's Review," it was intimated that "my grandmother" was not the reader of the review, but actually the writer; thereby insinuating, my dear Roberts, that you were an old woman; because, as people often say, "Jeffrey's Review,"²¹ "Gifford's Review,"²² in lieu of *Edinburgh and Quarterly*; so "my Grandmother's Review" and Roberts's might be also synonymous. Now, whatever colour this insinuation might derive from the cir-

cumstance of your wearing a gown, as well as from your time of life, your general style, and various passages of your writings,—I will take upon myself to exculpate you from all suspicion of the kind, and assert, without calling Mrs. Roberts in testimony, that if ever you should be chosen Pope, you will pass through all the previous ceremonies with as much credit as any pontiff since the parturition of Joan.²³ It is very unfair to judge of sex from writings, particularly from those of the *British Review*. We are all liable to be deceived; and it is an indisputable fact, that many of the best articles in your journal, which were attributed to a veteran female,²⁴ were actually written by you yourself; and yet to this day there are people who could never find out the difference. But let us return to the more immediate question.

I agree with you that it is impossible Lord Byron should be the author, not only because, as a British peer,²⁵ and a British poet, it would be impracticable for him to have recourse to such facetious fiction, but for some other reasons which you have omitted to state. In the first place, his lordship has no grandmother. Now the author—and we may believe him in this—doth expressly state that the “British” is his “Grandmother’s Review;” and if, as I think I have distinctly proved, this was not a mere figurative allusion to your supposed intellectual age and sex, my dear friend, it follows, whether you be she or no, that there is such an elderly lady still extant. And I can the more readily credit this, having a sexagenary aunt of my own, who perused you constantly, till unfortunately falling asleep over the leading article of your last number, her spectacles fell off and were broken against the fender, after a faithful service of fifteen years, and she has never been able to fit her eyes since; so that I have been forced to read you aloud to her; and this is in fact the way in which I became acquainted with the sub-

ject of my present letter, and thus determined to become your public correspondent.

In the next place, Lord B.'s destiny seems in some sort like that of Hercules²⁶ of old, who became the author of all unappropriated prodigies. Lord B. has been supposed the author of the "Vampire," of a "Pilgrimage to Jerusalem," "To the Dead Sea," of "Death upon the Pale Horse," of odes to "La Valette," to "Saint Helena," to the "Land of the Gaul," and to a sucking child²⁷. Now he turned out to have written none of these things. Besides, you say, he knows in what a spirit of, &c. you criticise—Are you sure he knows all this? that he has read you like my poor dear aunt? They tell me he is a queer sort of a man; and I would not be too sure, if I were you, either of what he has read or of what he has written. I thought his style had been the serious and terrible. As to his sending you money, this is the first time that ever I heard of his paying his reviewers in *that coin*; I thought it was rather in *their own*, to judge from some of his earlier productions. Besides, though he may not be profuse in his expenditure, I should conjecture that his reviewer's bill is not so long as his tailor's.

Shall I give you what I think a prudent opinion? I don't mean to insinuate, God forbid! but if, by any accident, there should have been such a correspondence between you and the unknown author, whoever he may be, send him back his money: I dare say he will be very glad to have it again: it can't be much, considering the value of the article and the circulation of the journal; and you are too modest to rate your praise beyond its real worth.—Don't be angry,—I know you won't,—at this appraisement of your powers of eulogy; for on the other hand, my dear friend, depend upon it your abuse is worth, not its own weight,—that's a feather,—but *your weight* in gold. So don't spare it: if he has bargained for *that*,

give it handsomely, and depend upon your doing him a friendly office.

But I only speak in case of possibility; for, as I said before, I cannot believe in the first instance, that you would receive a bribe to praise any person whatever; and still less can I believe that your praise could ever produce such an offer. You are a good creature, my dear Roberts, and a clever fellow; else I could almost suspect that you had fallen into the very trap set for you in verse by this anonymous wag, who will certainly be but too happy to see you saving him the trouble of making you ridiculous. The fact is, that the solemnity of your eleventh article does make you look a little more absurd than you ever yet looked, in all probability, and at the same time does no good; for if any body believed before in the octave stanzas, they will believe still, and you will find it not less difficult to prove your negative, than the learned Partridge found it to demonstrate his not being dead, to the satisfaction of the readers of almanacs.

What the motives of this writer may have been for (as you magnificently translate his quizzing you) “stating, with the “particularity which belongs to fact, the forgery of a ground-“less fiction,” (do pray, my dear R., talk a little less “in “King Cambyzes’ vein”²⁸) I cannot pretend to say; perhaps to laugh at you, but that is no reason for your benevolently making all the world laugh also. I approve of your being angry; I tell you I am angry too; but you should not have shown it so outrageously. Your solemn “*if* somebody per-“sonating the Editor of the,” &c. &c. “has received from “Lord B. or from any other person,” reminds me of Charley Incledon’s²⁹ usual exordium when people came into the tavern to hear him sing without paying their share of the reckoning —“If a maun, or *ony* maun, or *ony other* maun,” &c. &c.;

you have both the same redundant eloquence. But why should you think any body would personate you? Nobody would dream of such a prank who ever read your compositions, and perhaps not many who have heard your conversation. But I have been inoculated with a little of your prolixity. The fact is, my dear Roberts, that somebody has tried to make a fool of you, and what he did not succeed in doing, you have done for him and for yourself.

With regard to the poem itself, or the author, whom I cannot find out (can you?) I have nothing to say; my business is with you. I am sure that you will, upon second thoughts, be really obliged to me for the intention of this letter, however far short my expressions may have fallen of the sincere good will, admiration, and thorough esteem, with which I am ever, my dear Roberts,

Most truly yours,

WORTLEY CLUTTERBUCK.³⁰

Sept.—,—.
*Little Pidlington.*³¹

P.S. My letter is too long to revise, and the post is going. I forget whether or not I asked you the meaning of your last words, "the forgery of a groundless fiction." Now, as all forgery is fiction, and all fiction a kind of forgery, is not this tautological? The sentence would have ended more strongly with "forgery;" only it hath an awful Bank of England sound, and would have ended like an indictment, besides sparing you several words, and conferring some meaning upon the remainder. But this is mere verbal criticism. Good bye—once more yours truly,

W. C.

P. S. 2nd.—Is it true that the Saints make up the losses of the review?—It is very handsome in them to be at so great an expence—Pray pardon my taking up so much of your time from the bar, and from your clients, who I hear are about the same number with the readers of your journal. *Twice* more yours,

W. C.

EDITORIAL NOTES

¹ Reference to the *British Review and London Critical Journal* (1811-25) and its editor, William Roberts (1767-1849). In *Don Juan* I.209 (1819), Byron called *The British* “My Grandmother’s Review”, claiming to have bribed it in order to write a positive review of his poem. Roberts responded to this accusation in his article “Don Juan” (art. XI in *The British Review*, vol. 14, 1819), denying said charges. Byron replied to Roberts in “Letter to the Editor of ‘My Grandmother’s Review’”, written in 1819 but published only in 1822 in *The Liberal*. No further response from Roberts ever appeared.

² Reference to Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* I.209-10: “For fear some prudish readers should grow skittish, / I’ve bribed My Grandmother’s Review, – the British!”

³ Reference to “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819), p. 267: “A Review which has long maintained, in the cause of public and private virtue, its consistency and purity”.

⁴ *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* (1571), doctrinal statements of the Church of England.

⁵ Reference to “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819), p. 267: “The miserable man [...] who has given birth to this pestilent poem”.

⁶ Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, the first two cantos of which appeared in 1819.

⁷ Plural of “money”, a form frequently used at this time.

⁸ Charles Phillips (1786-1859), Irish poet and barrister.

⁹ John Liston (1776-1846), English comedian.

¹⁰ Untraced quotation.

¹¹ A sworn statement in writing, especially one made under oath before a magistrate or an officer.

¹² Reference to John Atkins (1760-1838), Lord Mayor of London in 1818 and 1819.

¹³ (Latin) Shameful thing. Reference to “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819), p. 266: “Of a poem so flagitious that no bookseller has been willing to take upon himself the publication”.

¹⁴ “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819).

¹⁵ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Critic; or, a Tragedy Rehearsed* (produced at Drury Lane in 1779 and published in 1781), a burlesque drama in three acts. In Act I, sc. 2, the “Puff collusive” assumes “as circumstances require, the various forms of Letter to the Editor, Occasional Anecdote, Impartial Critique, Observation from Correspondent, or Advertisement from the party”; the “puff collusive” also “acts in the disguise of determined hostility. It is much used by bold booksellers and enterprising poets”.

¹⁶ See “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819), p. 267: “The product of ‘studious lewdness’, and ‘laboured impiety’, appears to us in so detestable a light as the acceptance of a present by an editor of a review as the condition of praising an author”.

¹⁷ Reference to “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819), p. 267: “For miserable he is, as having a soul of which he cannot get rid”.

¹⁸ Lord Byron, *Don Juan* I.209-10.

¹⁹ William Sotheby (1757-1833), English poet and translator. Sotheby was the author of the epic poem *Saul; A Poem, in Two Parts* (1807), *Five Tragedies* (1814), and *Farewell to Italy* (1818).

²⁰ (Italian) Conversation. During the Romantic period, the term *Conversazione* was used to refer to social gatherings also dedicated to intellectual discussions about art, literature or music.

²¹ The *Edinburgh Review* (1802-1929), Whig periodical published by Archibald Constable (1774-1827) and edited by Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850) during the Romantic period.

²² The *Quarterly Review* (1809-1967), Tory periodical published by John Murray and edited by William Gifford (1756-1826) during the Romantic period.

²³ Pope Joan, a legendary female pope said to have reigned from 855 to 858.

²⁴ With a nod to the title of this “letter”, Byron mockingly refers to Roberts as an elderly woman.

²⁵ See “Don Juan”, *The British Review* 14 (1819), p. 267: “Lord Byron could not have been the author of this assertion concerning us [...] not only because he is a British peer”.

²⁶ Heracles (or Hercules), in Greek mythology the son of Zeus and Alcmene.

²⁷ Here Byron takes some liberty with the titles of works that were falsely attributed to him, whether by error or with fraudulent intent.

²⁸ In William Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* (1597), Act II, sc. 4, Falstaff speaks “in King Cambyse’s vein”, mocking the pretentious style of monarchs in medieval plays.

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²⁹ Charles Incledon (1763-1826), Cornish tenor singer.

³⁰ See Lord Byron's letter to John Murray of 23 August 1819: "I send you a letter to R**ts, signed 'Wortley Clutterbuck', which you may publish in what form you please, in answer to this article".

³¹ Fictional place, possibly Piddington in Oxfordshire.