



Romanticism on the Net

“Modish manners” and “decent vice”: Adultery in Byron’s *The Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn*

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Abstract

There is a persistent tendency in Byron scholarship to view the poet’s depictions of sexual activity as symbolic or metaphorical, a vehicle for political satire, social commentary, or attacks on religion. However, Byron’s treatment of sex must sometimes be considered as sex *qua* sex (or as Byron memorably describes it, “fuff-fuff”). This is particularly true of *The Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn*, a poem that deftly transforms the transgressive physicality of the “Voluptuous Waltz” into a codified expression of adulterous desire. This article considers how the theme of adultery, a pervasive and contentious element in contemporary print culture, informs Byron’s treatment of waltzing, investigating the rich array of cultural materials he incorporates into his satirical poem. This recovery of the poet’s subtle topical parodies and subversions allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the full scope of his satirical attacks in this complex and multifaceted poem.

Biographical Note

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Voluptuous Waltz! and dare I thus blaspheme?

Thy bard forgot thy praises were his theme.

Terpsichore, forgive! – at every Ball,

My wife now waltzes – and my daughters shall;

My son (or stop ' –tis needless to enquire –

These little accidents should ne'er transpire;

Some ages hence our genealogic tree

Will wear as green a bough for him as me)

Waltzing shall rear, to make our name amends,

Grandsons for me – in heirs to all his friends.

The Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn (249-257).¹

1. Whereas we now tend to view the waltz as the graceful, sophisticated relic of an era of by-gone elegance, when it arrived on Britain's shores in the early 1800s, it had a decidedly unsavoury reputation. In an age of group country dances, the sight of individual pairs whirling about the room, pelvis-to-pelvis, caused outrage owing to the ineluctable association of couples with coupling. However, despite—or perhaps because of—its sexualized rhythms, the waltz swiftly gained popularity amongst the *beau monde*, even being accepted into the hallowed halls of Almack's by the doyennes of fashionable propriety. It is against this backdrop that Byron writes *The Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn* (1813). This anonymously published satire has been viewed variously as a paradigmatic example of the outpouring of popular criticism against the imported dance, a denunciation of the Prince Regent's political treachery, an attack on the erosion of English cultural values, a scathing

satire on the follies of the fashionable world, and proof of the poet's hatred of dancing.

The controversial waltz also serves as a framing device through which Byron explores the theme of adultery, a pervasive and contentious element in contemporary print culture.

2. To fully understand how adultery informs Byron's treatment of waltzing, it is necessary to view conjugal infidelity as not only a private fleshly act but also a complex cultural and textual phenomenon that generated a broad array of discourses. The spectre of adultery looms large in the early nineteenth century, an inherently slippery and discursively permeable presence that saturated popular print culture and profoundly impacted the mental landscapes of Georgian England. Condemned in religious sermons and political polemics, lampooned in broadside ballads and satirical prints, reviled in conduct literature and sentimental novels, agonised over in law courts and denounced in primly prurient gossip columns, the topic of adultery pervaded every aspect of life during this period, from parliamentary debates to medical practices. Byron draws from this rich array of cultural materials in his treatments of adultery in *The Waltz*.
3. In *Satire and Romanticism*, Steven Jones reminds us that topical satire "requires public, shared references, the in-joke or knowing wink interpreted within a given social context as ridiculing or passing judgement on something both the satirist and audience understands as deserving of judgement" (179). However, the inherent topicality of *The Waltz* means that much of the work Byron put into this complex and multifaceted satire has been overlooked in later criticism, as many of the puns are no longer recognised. Juvenalian and Horatian modes of satire require author and reader to share cultural or lexiconic backgrounds against which the deviations of satirical exaggeration or ironic doubling are contrasted.

However, modern critical responses to *The Waltz* highlight how the evolution or erosion of this common ground can result in the redefining of satirical attacks as sincerely held attitudes. This article performs a re-contextualisation of the poem to address this shift in the critical recognition of Byron's satirical games and bring the poem back into focus, recovering subtle parodies and subversions that can register only with readers informed by the broader cultural backdrop against which *The Waltz* was written. This allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the full scope of Byron's satire, expanding our understanding of the multiple targets he attacks in the poem and its accompanying letter.

4. When the anonymously authored poem was published, it was accompanied by a letter written by one Horace Hornem, who is thus cast as the poem's ostensible progenitor. In this fashion, Byron both distances himself from his creation and uses that distance to frame and explore his own experiences of fashionable London life. The introduction of this pseudonymous figure also allows Byron to engage in a series of ironic reversals and doublings, displaying early indications of the Janus-like agility that Jones deems characteristic of his later satiric style (2). Initially, the letter and poem appear to espouse anti-waltzing rhetoric and condemn the sexual laxity of the *beau monde*, yet Hornem's gradual acceptance of these "modish manners" suggests that Byron's astute replication of anti-adultery and anti-waltzing discourses should be read rather as an ironic commentary on contemporary debates. For, while Byron might replicate these polemics, he does not necessarily share their sentiments, and, although Hornem initially appears as a priggish provincial, as letter and poem progress he becomes an ardent advocate of both the dance and the adulterous activities associated with it.

5. The first section of this article builds on existing scholarship regarding Byron's antipathy for waltzing, suggesting that the poet's deft reconstruction of contemporary anti-waltzing rhetoric should be read as an adroit satire of a popular debate. A key element of this satire is its focus on the ways in which polemicists consciously invoke the key tropes and tenets of anti-adultery discourses to enhance the impact of their condemnation of waltzing. The resultant conflation of waltzing and adultery in popular print culture is significant, as it makes many of Byron's other satirical attacks in *The Waltz* possible. It also calls into question whether the poet's apparent condemnation of waltzing and the libidinous passions it stimulates is sincere. For, although on one level the poem appears to be characterised by a form of prudish modesty (perhaps a relic of Byron's early upbringing amongst the middling classes of Aberdeen and Southwell), an entirely different outlook appears when the poem is read against the backdrop of the sociosexual mores of the *beau monde* (who had recently accepted Byron into their elite milieu). The second section of the article therefore delves into Byron's personal history and considers the ways in which the tensions between his early upbringing and new *tonnish* habits are reflected in the poem's inconsistent attitudes towards infidelity. In particular, this section focuses on the conflict the poem reveals between the residual influence of the social and moral conservatism absorbed during Byron's youth and the more liberal sociosexual mores of his new milieu. The final section looks at how Byron playfully leverages his newfound understanding of adultery *à la mode* to mock the sociosexual mores of both the middling and upper classes through a series of apostrophic vignettes. Giving voice to his own anxieties about public exposure after a brush with sexual scandal, Byron subverts the stock trope of the waltz as a catalytic stimulus for adulterous lust, and instead condemns the dancers—rather than the dance—for suc-

cumbing to the heady rush of physical intimacies and seductive gyrations, recklessly exposing their adulterous affairs and suffering ruinous public scandal.

This lewd grasp and lawless contact warm”: anti-waltzing rhetoric and anti-adultery discourses

6. The identity of the target of Byron’s satire in *The Waltz* is widely debated. Literary critics have variously argued that the poem criticises the politically (and sexually) incontinent Prince Regent (Dyer 19-25); condemns the erosion of English cultural values by the Hanoverian horde (Childers); and denounces the libertine tendencies of the *beau monde*, embodied in the disturbingly sexual and initially elitist pursuit of waltzing (Murray-Ray 37; Eisler 368). Others read it as a simple attack on waltzing inspired by personal jealousy or moral revulsion.² This diversity of interpretation highlights the complex subtleties of *The Waltz* and makes for a crowded critical dance floor. It also draws attention to the difficulty in determining the difference between sincerity and subversion, as two hundred years and the poem’s inherent topicality serve to obscure some of Byron’s satirical targets. For, although some elements of the poem (notably the condemnation of the Hanoverian monarchy and the sexually lax *ton*) are recognised as satire, other elements are typically read as “straight.” In particular, the criticisms of the waltz itself and those who dance it are frequently perceived as a reflection of Byron’s own views, leading to the poem being presented as the paradigmatic example of anti-waltzing sentiment.³

7. Of course, Byron would not have been the only member of the aristocracy to condemn the dance. Even Lady Caroline Lamb, increasingly a byword for hoydenish impropriety, was initially shocked by a dance she described as “criminal.” Following her first waltz (as the unwilling partner of a royal prince, an event she possibly recorded in fig. 1), she expressed fears that it would bring “ruin to the character of the young & innocent.”⁴ Likewise, the notoriously dissolute Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a leading Whig politician and playwright, denounced the waltz in tones of quivering outrage in his poem “The Walse,” casting it as the diabolic invention that stimulated sexual desire in the prelapsarian couple and thereby caused the Fall of Man.



Figure 1: Unfinished watercolour sketch of waltzing couple in Lady Caroline Lamb’s Commonplace Book. With kind permission from the John Murray Archive, National Library of Scotland, MS.43365.

8. Byron echoes Sheridan’s diabolic imagery and Lamb’s concerns, suggesting that only “Asmodeus” could have “struck so bright a stroke as this” (223) creating a dance

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To teach the young ideas how to rise,

Flush in the cheek and languish in the eyes. (224-225)

Earlier in the poem, he directly addresses the feminized waltz regarding her dangerous incitement to sexual sin:

thy subtler art

Intoxicates alone the heedless heart;

Through the full veins thy gentler poison swims,

And wakes to Wantonness the willing limbs. (35-38)

9. The alliteration in the final line and languorous sensuality of the elongated vowels, coupled with the rapid shift from love (“heart”) to arousal (“Wantonness”), underscore the perceived threat posed by the rhythmic rotations that supposedly plunged dancers into an irresistible delirium of desire.⁵ Throughout the poem, a clear distinction is made between the “lewd grasp” of waltzing and the “lawless contact warm” of illicit adulterous desire: alliteratively aligned and physically adjacent, they are linked but distinct. However, the epigraph to this section reiterates the popular conception of a progression from one to the other.

10. Nevertheless, although Byron was clearly aware of the popular criticism hurled against “Belial and his Dance” (l.28), the argument that his attack against waltzing is sincere is complicated by the fact that this assault is restricted to a comparatively small number of lines and is entirely absent from the accompanying letter (itself often overlooked in analysis of the poem). The argument is weakened further by the poem’s flattering descrip-

tions of the “spirit-stirring Waltz” (19) and concluding assertion that “praises” of the dance were the poem’s “theme.” Although sexually suspect (“half a w—re” 147), the anthropomorphised waltz is nevertheless described as “Endearing” (109), “Delightful” (80), and “Imperial” (29) in her stately grace. In fact, “she” is so enjoyable that Hornem becomes an ardent adherent of the fashionable pastime, encouraging the rest of his family to follow suit and writing an adulatory poem upon the topic:

Gods! how the glorious theme my strain exalts,

And Rhyme finds partner Rhyme in praise of “Waltz”! (159-160).

Of course, this elegiac panegyric on the deliciously “ambrosial” (l.91) waltz and the seductive perfection of her rounded limbs can be read as a sly satire on the eagerness with which the fashionable world embraced the dance. Surreptitiously reiterating popular anxieties regarding the ineluctable transition from dancing couples to adulterous coupling via the emphasis on rhyming couplets, these lines also mock the *beau monde*’s tacit endorsement of adultery. The numerous instances of this kind of multilayered attack throughout the poem encourage us to consider whether Byron’s condemnation of waltzing and the sexual activities it stimulates should not be read as satirical.

11. Although the presentation of dancing in *The Waltz* is undoubtedly overshadowed by Byron’s exclusion from this popular pastime (social conventions precluded those with visible disabilities from joining the dancefloor),⁶ the poem’s cunning attack on waltzing cannot be ascribed to a mere outburst of jealous spleen. An astute social commentator with a keen ethnographic eye, Byron offers a poetic reproduction of anti-waltzing rhetoric—lauded by dance historians as the quintessential example of the widespread outrage that

erupted in England following the importation of the German dance— that is perhaps too perfect to be a genuine reflection of his own views. Moreover, if genuine, such sentiments would sit oddly within the broader context of the poem’s multifaceted satirical attacks. They also jar with Hornem’s apparent transition from moral revulsion to eager endorsement of both waltzing and the adulterous activities associated with it. This is underscored by the poem’s language and tone, which are markedly different from the fear and disgust that characterise contemporary attacks against both waltzing and aristocratic infidelity. Thus, although noting that waltzing ladies of the current generation are “more caressing” (144) than “those Belles, whose reign began of yore,/With George the Third’s” (133-134), the poet is amused rather than appalled by this amorousness, wryly observing that “Superfluous Hartshorn, and reviving Salts” have been “banished by the sovereign cordial ‘Waltz’” (145-146).

12. This overt connection between dancing and sexual desire draws attention to a crucial factor supporting the argument that Byron’s condemnation of waltzing is a satirical parody, as the poet deliberately singles out the key instances where anti-adultery discourses have been absorbed and repurposed in anti-waltzing rhetoric. As David Turner notes in *Fashioning Adultery: Gender, Sex and Civility in England, 1660–1740*, the growing disapproval of conjugal infidelity was rooted in the early eighteenth-century process by which new cultural concepts of polite civility and genteel refinement rendered overt sexual immorality increasingly distasteful (23-49). By the end of the century, exacerbated by the overthrow of the degenerate French *regime* and the anarchic chaos that followed, this tendency coalesced into what Donna Andrew describes as a “systemically and powerfully

articulated” campaign against aristocratic adultery (“Adultery à la mode” 23). The key features of this campaign include the association of infidelity with a dissipated aristocratic metropolitan elite;⁷ the fear that such promiscuous practices were contagious and would infect other social orders;⁸ the belief that adultery eroded the capacity for civic duty and military valour;⁹ anxieties about the ensuing societal collapse;¹⁰ and the concomitant conviction that female virtue was vital to the moral and military fortification of the nation.¹¹ Ranging from polemical treatises and religious sermons to satirical prints and doggerel broadsides, anti-adultery anxieties permeated every area of Georgian print culture.¹² “No vice can prove more fatal to dissolve the ties of society, to bring distrust and distress into families” asserts the author of *Evils of Adultery and Prostitution* (1792), adding hysterically, “no vice can be more infectious, and have a more dreadful influence on the rising population” (3).

13. The insistent association of elite sexual transgression with societal collapse found in works such as *The Evils of Adultery* recalls the association of waltzing (and related sexual activities) with the Fall of Man in Sheridan’s poem. In *The Waltz*, Byron demonstrates that this parallel is not a coincidence. Though the connection has not previously been noted by cultural historians, Byron’s reproduction of anti-waltzing sentiments draws attention to the ways in which opponents of waltzing consciously play upon the concerns popularised in anti-adultery discourses, seeking support from a population already convinced of the connection between a morally debauched nobility and a morally debauched nation. The resultant conflation of adultery and waltzing is one of the central underpinnings of *The*

Waltz, a recognisable association that allows Byron to create a double satire mocking middle-class morality and upper-class immorality at the same time.

14. Comparing the poem to a particularly fine example of anti-waltzing rhetoric in *The Times* allows us to more fully appreciate Byron's skilful parody. When the Regent's fête at Carlton House opened with a waltz in July 1816, *The Times* grumbled about the presence of "the indecent foreign dance called the Waltz" and its introduction "at the English Court":

National morals depend on national habits; and it is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwinings of the limbs and close compressure of the bodies, in their dance, to see that it is indeed far removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females. So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses we did not think it deserving of notice; but now that it is attempted to be forced upon the respectable classes by the evil example of their superiors, we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion. (July 16, 1816)

This passage shares various features with *The Waltz*, explaining the poem's frequent classification as a genuine example of anti-waltzing rhetoric by scholars misreading Byron's satire as sincere sentiment. Crucially, moreover, these common elements also highlight the interpenetration of anti-adultery and anti-waltzing discourses.

15. Laura Runge notes that "anti-adultery discourses" tend "to collapse the category of the adulteress with those of the whore and prostitute" (566). The same tendency is evident in

the denunciation of waltzing as an “obscene display” that should be “confined to prostitutes and adulteresses” in *The Times*. Isaac Robert Cruikshank’s 1816 satirical print *Waltzing! or a peep into the Royal Brothel Sprint Gardens dedicated with propriety to the Lord Chamberlain* graphically parodies these contemporary anxieties with its depiction of lasciviously entwined dancers and equation of ballrooms with brothels (fig. 2).¹³ Byron offers a comparable message in the following lines, with their pointed juxtaposition of “Countesses” and “Queans” (prostitutes):

Thee Fashion hails – from Countesses to Queans,
And maids and valets waltz behind the scenes;
Wide and more wide thy witching circle spreads,
And turns – if nothing else – at least our heads;
With thee e’en clumsy cits attempt to bounce,
And cockneys practice what they can’t pronounce. (153-158)

Here, as in *The Times*, we find the waltz’s transgressive sexuality hinted at in the affinity with prostitutes, as well as the suggestion that the aristocracy (“Countesses”) are no better than they should be (and, indeed, rather worse than *The Times* would like).

16. These shrewdly parodic lines contain a further example of the doubling of anti-adultery and anti-waltzing rhetoric in the description of the spread of this elitist pastime with carnivalesque alliteracy from “Countesses to Queans” and thence to the formerly moral middling classes (“clumsy cits”), finally reaching the “cockneys” at the bottom of the metropolitan midden heap. There are unmistakable parallels with the aggrieved observations of anti-adultery essayists complaining about the “pernicious rapidity” with which immor-

ality spread “from the Great down to the lowest classes” (Andrews 4), and “adultery, incontinence, and every species of lewdness” are no longer “fixed at court” but eagerly embraced by “the city-dames and city-beaux” (“Thoughts on Fashionable Vice” 480). The *Times* writer likewise displays a pronounced anxiety about “respectable classes” emulating the “evil example of their superiors,” presenting the waltz as an unstoppable infection. Significantly, the writer’s use of the phrase “so fatal a contagion” draws attention to a key trait of anti-adultery polemics, which routinely denounced adultery as a “fashionable influenza,” with terms such as “infectious,” “contagion,” “pestilence,” and “disease” surfacing with notable regularity.¹⁴



Figure 2: *Waltzing! or a peep into the Royal Brothel Spring Gardens dedicated with propriety to the Lord Chamberlain*, Isaac Robert Cruikshank, 1816. British Museum Object 1935,0522.7.72.

17. *The Times* is especially concerned about women's vulnerability to this infection, bemoaning the erosion of the "modest reserve" formerly "distinctive of English females." Similar anxieties appear in the entry under "Waltz" in *Rees's Cyclopaedia* (1743–1825, 1819), which reflects upon the uneasiness felt by "an English mother" watching "her daughter so familiarly treated" and the consternation generated by observing "the obliging manner in which the freedom is returned" once girls are aroused by the intoxicating rhythms of the dance (37, unpaginated). These texts reflect dual anxieties about the way waltzing both renders women vulnerable to seduction and stimulates their latent lewdness. *The Waltz* picks up on this doubled *topos*, observing that "No damsel faints when rather closely pressed/But more caressing seems when most caressed" (143-144) and slyly suggesting that the exhilarating sensation of "hands promiscuously applied,/Round the slight waist, or down the glowing side" (233-234) would transform passively sexless females into libidinous coquettes. In explicitly resituating the transgressive physicality of the "Voluptuous Waltz" (248) away from the ballroom and into the bedroom, the poem thus transforms the dance into a codified expression of adulterous desire, a shrewd articulation of the anxieties of anti-waltzing campaigners.

18. Meanwhile, in implying that "the indecent foreign dance" was to blame for a rise in aristocratic infidelity, *The Times* supports Kristin Samuelian's observation that anti-waltzing rhetoric is inflected by "a set of anxieties about Continental and catholic influences," forming "part of a discourse that sought to establish class and national identities in the post-revolutionary era" (799-800). These anxieties consciously echo the anti-adultery argument that "the Introduction of [...] foreign Amusements" into England automatically

caused “an Increase of Immorality” (Andrews 6). Both groups of texts display a jingoistic conviction of moral pre-eminence, and Byron not only replicates these nationalistic registers in *The Waltz* but deftly underscores their dual origins through his deliberate emphasis on the erosion of “English life and letters,” as Childers phrases it.¹⁵

19. Childers’ consideration of the poem’s cultural elements also draws attention to Byron’s weighted reference to German playwright August von Kotzebue (“ten plays and forty tales of Kotzebue’s” [72]). One of Kotzebue’s most successful plays was *The Stranger*, translated by Benjamin Thompson and revised by Sheridan. Though popular, the play garnered widespread condemnation owing to its redemption of the adulterous heroine, unforgivable in England’s increasingly censorious moral climate. “To represent a *wife* and *mother* who had fallen the *easy* and almost *voluntary* victim of seduction, restored to her husband and children, is a dangerous exhibition,” one reviewer argues, claiming “dramatic justice” should have ensured her death (*Monthly Mirror*, April 1798, 232).¹⁶ Anti-adultery essayists were even more forthright in their denunciations. “O Kotzebue! Kotzebue!” exclaims Thomas Comber in his 1810 treatise *Adultery Analyzed*, fearing that the play’s “poisonous” presentation of a “votary of illicit passion” as a figure of “admiration” would pave the way “for the greatest licentiousness and dissolution of morals” (127, 136). This promotion of adultery, he argues (somewhat incoherently), was part of a subversive French plot to undermine England’s moral and military defences. By invoking the taint of sexual immorality clinging to Kotzebue’s name, *The Waltz* adroitly underlines the nationalistic strains shared by anti-waltzing and anti-adultery rhetoric, pointedly fusing concerns about

cultural adulteration and national morality in the allusion to Kotzebue and the description of the promiscuous yet *fêted* Waltz as “the lovely Stranger” (107). Byron’s deliberate inclusion of this specific figure and provocative allusion to his controversial play underscores the satirical calculation underpinning these lines.

20. Given the poem’s deliberate reproduction of anti-waltzing sentiments, carefully couched in idioms drawn from anti-adultery rhetoric, it is unsurprising that some contemporary reviewers praised *The Waltz* for holding “up to reprobation the licentiousness and indecorum of the dance” and revealing “the pernicious effect” of waltzing “on female manners and morals.”¹⁷ Modern scholars, influenced by these reviews and lacking alternative sources, have likewise read *The Waltz* as part of the prim outpouring of disgust by middling-class moralists.¹⁸ Yet such interpretations overlook Byron’s ability to incorporate multiple competing points of view into his poetry, enabling him to mock the sexual hypocrisy of the upper classes and the moral priggishness of the middling classes at the same time. For example, Ernest Coleridge (1:186) and Jerome McGann (3:396) both remark upon Byron’s invocation of Sheridan’s verses on the death of “modesty” in “waltzing females” in lines seemingly mourning the fact that

Morals and Minuets, Virtue and her stays,

And tell-tale Powder – all have had their day (182-183).

Yet, neither comment upon the ripple of relief undermining this spurious grief as the (presumably amorously inclined) poet realises that new fashions will facilitate adulterous liaisons; “tell-tale Powder” is gone, and no longer will “stiff-starched stays make meddling fingers ache” (140). These critical responses reiterate the difficulties modern readers ex-

perience in identifying satirical targets when the common ground between poet and reader has been eroded, leaving our understanding of contemporary cultural debates incomplete.

“Modish manners” and “decent vice”: Byron’s perception of the sociosexual mores of the *beau monde*

21. Byron's attitude to conjugal infidelity is complex, particularly following his sudden rise to national fame and entrance into the elite social sphere of the *beau monde* in 1812, and this undoubtedly informs his treatment of the topic in *The Waltz*, which hints at the poet's difficulty in adapting to the looser moral codes of his new milieu. For, prior to the overnight success of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron was merely an impoverished scion of the lesser nobility. His early upbringing and somewhat vulgar Scottish mother left him unversed in the social graces (and sociosexual mores) of the metropolitan elite. This was compounded by his period of more than a decade spent mixing with middling-class families such as the London-based Hansons and the Piggotts in provincial Southwell in Nottinghamshire.¹⁹ Yet, as Leslie Marchand suggests, Byron had a “psychological urge, built upon the whole background of his early life, to be accepted as a social equal in the aristocratic world” (324). Suddenly thrust into this elevated milieu by virtue of his poetic skill, Byron's inadequate grasp of what he labels the “modish manners” of “Fashion's Host” (l.20) caused him to commit the serious social *faux pas* of a highly public liaison with Lady Caroline Lamb.

22. The affair itself was not a solecism, for adultery was generally viewed as a socially acceptable amusement by the *ton* owing to the practise of arranged marriages. “Girls are often married, hardly knowing their Husbands or what marriage is,” Lamb’s mother Lady Bessborough explains, and there are “many,” she continues with the wistful voice of experience, “who would gladly separate, and still more gladly chuse again, if they could do so without ruining their characters” (qtd. in Hartcup 17). Divorce and remarriage were difficult and generally frowned upon. Therefore, the only way for aristocratic women to “chuse again...without ruining their characters” was to conduct a discrete liaison, known to their peers but not to the public. For the *ton*’s tolerance was conditional, based on circumspection, as Joan Perkin observes:

Good breeding demanded that the outward conventions of marriage should not be violated, but few questions were asked about what went on beneath the surface. [...]

Anything openly shocking was regarded with horror—not on account of the immorality, but the publicity. (89-90)

The fashionable world, Byron notes with dryly alliterative brevity, “care but for discoveries and not deeds” (*Don Juan* XII: 80).

23. This is highlighted by Lady Melbourne’s reaction to Lady Caroline Lamb’s indiscrete flirtations. An experienced adulteress herself, she repeatedly criticised her daughter-in-law’s “disgusting” conduct and “disgraceful” refusal to conform to “the decencys imposed by Society” (qtd. in Douglass, “Godfrey Vassal Affair” 123). For Lamb defiantly declined to emulate the “hypocrisy and deceit” of those around her, condemning what she labelled “the little arts some practise” to retain the “praises of the World.”²⁰ Thus, in the spring of

1812, Byron, untutored in the ways of “the world,” and Lamb, constitutionally incapable of discretion, scandalised the *ton* with their brazen disregard for social proprieties.

Banker-poet Samuel Rogers offers a particularly vivid illustration of this, recording his shock at Lamb’s behaviour one evening outside Devonshire House:

Such was the insanity of her passion for Byron that sometimes when not invited to a party where he was to be she would wait for him in the street, till it was over! One night after a great party at Devonshire House to which Caroline had not been invited, I saw her, yes saw her, talking to Byron with half her body thrust into the carriage into which he had just entered (233-234).

Rogers’s exclamatory repetition of “saw her” conveys a spluttering indignation at Lamb’s public displays of private passion, displays which the socially and emotionally insecure Byron did nothing to curtail.

24. Yet, though Byron was initially flattered to be so ardently pursued, his letters reveal that he was soon exhausted by his lover’s histrionics. By August of 1812, the affair was over, though Lamb refused to accept her *congé* and, “haunted with hysterics” (*BLJ* 3: 71), Byron fled to Cheltenham. It was here, surrounded by the cream of Whig society, that he started to write *The Waltz*, producing a cynical enumeration of the adulterous pursuits and proprieties of the Regency *beau monde* (of which he now had first-hand knowledge). The poem offers glimpses of inner tensions as the poet works to understand and adapt to a new moral code. (He was to do something similar a decade later in Italy when, conforming to local practices, he becomes a *cavalier servente* and uses *Beppo* and *Don Juan* to explore what it means to be reduced to a mere “piece of female property” [*BLJ* VII: 128]).

25. Byron's growing friendships with the leading ladies of the Whig sphere are undoubtedly influential in this context. These included Lady Holland, whose adulterous affair with Lord Holland saw her divorced by her first husband; the promiscuous Lady Oxford, who would shortly number Byron amongst her many lovers; Lady Jersey, whose husband famously said that defending his honour would entail fighting every man in London; Lady Cowper, who conducted a thirty-year affair with Lord Palmerston; and most importantly, the deliciously *méchante* matriarch of the Lamb family, Lady Melbourne. Childers argues that Byron's political ties to this set influenced the inception of *The Waltz*; the influence of his sexual situation—the entanglement with Lamb and his constant recourse to Melbourne for advice—must be granted equal weight.

26. Certainly, Whig sociosexual values start to permeate the young poet's writings from the autumn of 1812. This is most obviously apparent in the numerous expressions of disgust at Lamb's "total want of common conduct" (*BLJ* 2: 179) and refusal to "act right" (*BLJ* 3: 35). In phrases such as these, Byron reveals both his newfound awareness of a normative code of carnal conduct and his recognition of Lamb's (and by extension his own) social solecisms. Looking back at his affair with Lamb with repentant horror and fearing that his erstwhile lover's lack of circumspection would "tear the last rags of [his] tattered reputation into shreds" (*BLJ* 3: 65), Byron embarked upon a fruitless campaign to curtail her indiscretion. In one epistle, he heatedly informs Melbourne that Lamb's wilful imprudence would make "this business so public that it will appear more publicly still" when the newspapers caught wind of such titillating gossip. This was "the more provoking as

the least circumspection on her part would prevent people from thinking of it at all" (*BLJ* 3: 10), he complains. Letters such as this reveal an almost obsessive interest in sexual circumspection, which was to become the hallmark of Byron's liaisons in the coming years.

27. James Soderholme refers to "Byron's code of secrecy" and a desire for privacy dictated on his terms "via control over social rituals, images, tokens and writings," a dominion that Lamb threatens and indeed overturns in her forging of Byron's handwriting (25). However, this impulse is not merely an idiosyncratic desire for "control" but is also the result of an externally enforced social imperative to avoid public scandal, what Byron subsequently calls "les bienséances" or "bonos mores" of adultery *à la mode*. His inclination to conform to these sociosexual codes would have been reinforced by a sense of propriety derived from his self-conscious identification with Augustan literature, itself exacerbated by both a natural tendency to use secrecy to add intensity to liaisons and his youthful exposure to more prudish middling-class sociosexual ideologies.

28. As Clara Tuite notes, the Byron-Lamb love story "has traditionally functioned to confirm Byron's seductive fatality" (*Scandalous Celebrity* 20). However, the aftermath of the relationship offers proof of the poet's desire to conform to the *ton's* proprieties (what he terms "my system, and the modern system in general" [*BLJ* 2: 241]), a desire hinted at in William Gifford's anxious conviction that Byron had fallen out of "respectable society" and into the "bad hands" of the fashionable Whigs (qtd. in Nicolson 73). *The Waltz*, with its strident advocacy of discrete infidelity juxtaposed with the vehement condemnation of a

wanton dance, captures a pivotal point in this transition from the genteel precepts of Southwell's "antiquated virginity" (*BLJ* 1:123) to the "decent vice" of the Holland House set (149).

29. The poem's anonymous publication, dramatic structuring, and inclusion of the pseudonymous Horace Hornem are instructive in this context, as Byron consciously separates himself from his poetic creation and constructs a fictive persona through which to explore his own entrance into fashionable society. Robert Elliott suggests that the satirist is a shadowy figure hovering on the fringes, both inside and outside the community he attacks. Certainly, this is true of *The Waltz*, where Hornem's gauche insecurities give a glimpse of Byron's own unease in the world he now inhabits. Like the fictional Hornem, Byron carries aspects of his middle-class upbringing with him into high society, leading him to view the *ton*'s sociosexual mores with an ironic, gimlet eye. This liminal position helps to shape the complex satirical dichotomies and thickly layered contextualities of *The Waltz*.

30. Ostensibly inspired by Hornem's family sojourn to London, the poem is preceded by a letter in which he conscientiously describes himself as a "country gentleman" with an "entailed" estate. He is thus a member of the parish gentry, aligned with the kind of provincial "squirearchy" who populate Austen's novels, and we are initially encouraged to laugh at his rustic ignorance of fashionable niceties. However, Hornem's wife was once a "Maid of Honour," and it is her *tonnish* connections which gives this parochial family their *entrée* into high society. While he remains decidedly provincial, on her return to London his

wife embraces the fashionable foibles of her former milieu. The swift purchase of a “second-hand barouche” suggests Mrs Hornem is desperate to be *à la mode*. This inference is supported by her equally rapid acquisition of a “partner-general and opera-knight” in the form of the “Honourable Augustus Tiptoe.” Although it is not made explicit whether Tiptoe is Mrs Hornem’s lover, his name not only invokes dance movements but is also redolent of stealthy night-time journeys, furtively traversing corridors to despoil conjugal beds.²¹ Contemporary readers are encouraged to assume as much by Tiptoe’s brazen usurpation of Hornem’s place in the louche barouche, as Byron toys with a common trope in contemporary matrimonial litigation concerning the adulterous wife giving the best foodstuffs and seating to lover rather than her husband (Turner 166).

31. Ousted from his carriage, Hornem subsequently finds himself supplanted as his wife’s partner at a ball and, implicitly, in her bed. Arriving late, he finds Mrs Hornem waltzing “with her arms round the loins of a huge hussar-looking gentleman; and his, to say truth, rather more than half round her waist.” This close physical embrace, coupled with the description of the couple’s rhythmic movements, is suggestive of erotic passion. This is strengthened by the juxtaposition of “loins” and “huge,” which intensifies the scene’s sexual undercurrents, endowing the military gentleman with a priapic dominance over the implicitly smaller and less assertively masculine Hornem, his imminent cuckoldom implied by his name. The impression of adultery is suggestively foregrounded by the aural similarity between Hornem and Horner, the rakish hero of William Wycherley’s *Country Wife*, one of the poem’s many resonances with Restoration literature.²² Childers suggests

that the figures of Waltzaway and Tiptoe mock Germanic names (83), but, along with Hornem, these descriptive appellations are equally reminiscent of the bawdy eighteenth-century plays Byron admired. Hornem's epistolary narrative also invokes the common Restoration trope of country wives succumbing to metropolitan vices; Mrs Hornem's desperate desire to be "*à la mode*," leading to her adoption of a "gallant" and the banishment of her rustic husband, recalls the "Hard fate of husbands" described in John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester's *Letter from Artemisia in the Town to Chloe in the Country* (103, 83).

32. Tantalising hints of Byron's own provincial upbringing seem to seep through in the first half of the letter, the stricter morals of his youth echoed in Hornem's shocked response to his wife's behaviour. The letter conveys his horrified bewilderment, couching sociosexual commentary in a plaintive appeal for advice, implicitly equating the declining popularity of "cotillions [and] reels" with the declining popularity of conjugal fidelity. This device not only replicates the letters written by anti-waltzing commentators such as "A Friend to Public Morals" (*Morning Post*, July 27, 1811), but also recalls those of anti-adultery campaigners. Both groups were drawn to modern journals which, as Andrew notes, not only allowed "moralists to broadcast their complaints to a wide and growing reading public" but also allowed "that public to respond with letters to the editor" (*Aristocratic Vice* 9). Reader recognition of Byron's sly parody would have been facilitated by Hornem's name, with its connotations of cuckoldom. Such puns were common fare in the satirical attacks against aristocratic adultery published in periodicals and newspapers.²³ Their prevalence ensures that Byron's readers would be likely to identify the conventions surrounding the

shamefaced letter and anticipate a satirically shrouded social commentary on sexual misconduct.

33. Yet Hornem does not, in fact, produce a scathing satire against upper-class infidelity. Instead, as the letter progresses, he learns that such affairs were commonplace and no cause for concern. Turning in outrage to the woman next to him, he is rebuked for his parochial priggishness; “L—d, Mr. Hornem, can’t you see they are waltzing?” she exclaims, her Germanic accent underscoring the inherently threatening foreign origins of the waltz. The insistent conflation of waltzing and adultery in contemporary print culture would have ensured that readers understood the underlying implications of her blithe disregard, and the letter deliberately frames waltzing as both catalyst and metonymy for infidelity.
34. As Cheryl Wilson notes, amongst the “upper classes nineteenth-century culture was a culture of dance [...] to fully participate in the social and cultural world was to dance” (*Literature and Dance* 2-3). Byron pre-emptively develops this concept in *The Waltz*, suggesting that, to participate in society, one must also participate in the *ton*’s “decent vice,” namely adultery *à la mode*. In accordance with this tacit directive, Hornem ceases to be the “naively obtuse and distanced observer” described by Steven Bruhm and instead engages in such pursuits himself (20). He ends his letter on an ebullient note, buoyed up by his sexual “victories” with “Mrs Hornem’s maid,” whom he “four times overturned” that morning (supposedly while practising waltzing). The emphasis on “four times” produces a vivid impression of a middle-aged man gloatingly proud of his new-found priapic prowess. Indeed, Hornem becomes so enthusiastic that he produces a laudatory paean,

The Waltz, praising all the “lovely beldames” (219) who enjoy such ambiguously “genial contact” (209). Thus, the letter’s anticipated rhetorical pose of savage indignation is hinted at and then overturned as Hornem is transformed into Wycherly’s Horner, an equally avid adherent of the waltz and its sexual counterpart (“I now like it above all things”).

35. Whereas we were previously encouraged to laugh at Hornem and echo the young woman’s scornful assessment of his ignorance, he has adopted the “modish manners” of the *beau monde*; he is recast as an insightful interlocutor who has mastered the complex sociosexual mores of high society. Hornem’s newfound understanding enables him to produce a didactic poem showcasing his knowledge for socially aspirational readers. Instead of the ignorant country bumpkin who wrote the letter—a gawping bystander clearly positioned as an outsider at the fashionable ball (and mocked for it)—the poet is wryly knowledgeable, engaging the reader in an *entre nous* exchange designed to underscore his inclusion in this most elitist sphere.

36. From the start of the poem, the connection between sexual immorality and waltzing is pointedly emphasised. In a snide allusion to anti-waltzing discourses, the “not too lawfully begotten Waltz” is, “herself,” the result of the muse Terpsichore’s illicit liaison. Lest readers think Byron is upbraiding the “Muse of the many-twinkling feet” (1) for her sexual immorality (“least a Vestal of the Virgin Nine” [1.6]), he openly praises her fortitude in successfully withstanding public criticism. “Mocked, yet triumphant, sneered at, subdued” (8), Terpsichore arrives on England’s shores with her illegitimate offspring in tow. Their rapid acceptance by English high society and its leader, the rampantly adulterous

“whiskered votary of Waltz and War” (16) Prince George, offers a sardonic allusion to the *ton*’s tacit endorsement of adultery and adulterers.

37. In addition to the anti-Hanoverian sentiments noted by Childers, the poem’s opening stanzas reveal Hornem’s knowledge of and support for these aristocratic sociosexual mores, as he addresses:

Ye husbands of ten years! Whose brows
Ache with the annual tributes of a spouse;
To you of nine years less, who only bear
The budding sprouts of those you *shall* wear
With added ornaments around them rolled,
Of native brass, or law-awarded gold. (93-98)

The term “tribute” is cleverly multivalent. The most obvious meaning is that, just as a stag gains a new pair of *anteocular* each year, so husbands will inevitably be cuckolded. However, there is also the possibility of a financial “tribute” in the form of crass bribery (the “native brass” of power and patronage) or “law-awarded gold” should a wronged husband demand financial compensation for a lover’s trespass into the conjugal preserve via criminal conversation lawsuits.²⁴ Furthermore, there is the “tribute” of the “children of – whom chance accords - /*Always* the ladies, and *sometimes* their lords” (101-102). Murray-Ray suggests the poem displays an “anxiety” around “female agency and reproduction,” alluding to Burke’s fears concerning “patrilineal succession” (36). However, this was very much a middling-class concern. Amongst the aristocracy, illegitimacy was a fact of life, as

Hornem emphasises, whimsically envisaging imported “living stock” (34) improving aristocratic bloodlines.²⁵ Like Terpsichore’s illegitimate daughter, these offspring were accepted as ostensibly legitimate by the *ton* by virtue of their mother’s discretion. Indeed, cultural conventions, what Byron terms “the *bienséance* of a married man” (*BLJ* 3: 241), demand that, provided a wife produced a legitimate first-born son, a husband should not enquire too closely into the parentage of subsequent offspring.²⁶ Byron experienced this tolerance first-hand, initially while at Cambridge with George Lamb, Melbourne’s adulterine son by Prince George,²⁷ and later with Lady Oxford, whose numerous affairs resulted in a collection of children of problematic paternity to which Byron feared he might also have contributed.²⁸ In letters to his friends, he merrily anticipates that, if he eventually married, “even handed justice will return me cuckoldom in abundance” (*BLJ* 2: 251) and require him to raise children “of whose paternity I entertained doubts” (*BLJ* 4: 139).

38. Byron draws attention to this social convention in *The Waltz* via Hornem’s querulous emphasis on “My son” (252) in the final stanza, recalling Leontes’s pained query in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, “art thou my calf?” (I.ii.155). Whereas Leontes’s suspicions are unfounded, Hornem’s are not. Unlike Shakespeare’s archetype of husbandly jealousy, however, Byron’s Regency gentleman is superbly sanguine about the whole thing (“stop ’ –tis needless to enquire” [252]). Indeed, he looks with immoderate relish to a time when his son will not only become a cuckold himself (“Some ages hence our genealogic tree/Will wear as green a bough for him as me” [254-255]) but will grant the same dubious privilege to his peers:

Waltzing shall rear, to make our name amends

Grandsons for me – in heirs to all his friends. (256-257)

While recalling the accusation that waltzing leads to promiscuity, these lines convey a sense of tolerance, even anticipatory pleasure, at the prospect. Moreover, in striking contrast to works such as *Rees's Cyclopaedia*, Hornem is equally complaisant about the idea that his daughters, like his wife, will graft “little accidents” (253) onto their husbands’ family trees in accordance with the sociosexual mores of the fashionable elite.

39. However, even here in the concluding stanza of the poem, the message remains deeply equivocal. Immediately prior to these lines endorsing male seduction and female infidelity, Byron denounces those who succumb to the libidinous promptings of the waltz and indulge in “lawless contact warm.” But just as the reader is encouraged to anticipate a vitriolic crescendo of condemnation at the poem’s conclusion, the poet catches himself up, asking Terpsichore and her daughter to “forgive” him (250) for maligning them: “Thy bard forgot thy praises were his theme” (249). The subsequent “praises” are somewhat lukewarm, however, acquiescing to adultery rather than wholeheartedly commending waltzing itself, and blaming these activities on “waltzing,” again invoking the central anxieties of the anti-waltzing campaigners. Small wonder, then, that readers of *The Waltz* are often left bewildered, uncertain as to exactly who or what is being targeted in Byron’s satire.²⁹ In part, this lack of consistency reprises Byron’s own stumbling entrance into the fashionable world (and fashionable beds), and reflects his ongoing attempts to align the moral codes of his middling-class upbringing with the sexual laxity tacitly endorsed by the *beau monde* as his moral and social positions evolve. It also reflects Byron’s emergent satirical

style—ironic misdirections, reversals, and doublings—a technique he perfected in *Don Juan*, where the relentlessly ironical narrator insistently draws attention to and mocks the discourses with which the poet engages.

“My slippery steps are safest in the dark!”: the denunciation of indiscretion not infidelity

40. In this final section, I want to consider how Byron’s parody of anti-waltzing polemics subtly inverts established tropes. Instead of denouncing “Belial and his dance” for paving the way for illicit sexual activity, he instead condemns adulterous lovers recklessly disregarding the perils of public exposure when waltzing. In “The Egalitarian Waltz,” Ruth Katz highlights the difference between the waltz and its predecessor, the minuet. In the latter, onlookers “form an important part of the spectacle.” However, the waltz is not, in modern parlance, a spectator sport. As Kratz notes, there is no formal role for “audience or onlookers [...] the emphasis is on the participation of all,” and this fosters a deliberate disregard for “the world outside” the environs of the dance—a world that is nevertheless keenly observing and dissecting every move, as Cruikshank’s print demonstrates (370-371). Alison Sulloway describes the dance as a “socially sanctioned form of sexual display” (143) which, as Cheryl Wilson points out, “was imbued with clear rules [...] regarding the selection of partners and behaviour on and off the dance floor” (“Waltz in England” para. 4). In this context, the waltz is uniquely suited to the metaphorical purpose to which Byron adapts it, the exclusionary signifier of an elitist pursuit which is also widely practised, visible yet ignored, open to all but tightly regulated.

41. Kratz's emphasis on the insular disregard encouraged by the dance underscores the key danger it poses with regards to the *ton's* sociosexual proprieties, a danger *The Waltz* insistently stresses throughout letter and poem. In his 1828 satire, *The Age Reviewed*, Robert Montgomery denounces the "Connubial waltz," which kindles a "lech'rous flame" in its dancers and "hide[s] indecent motions" (1671-1674), but Byron is not concerned with hidden indecencies, rather the opposite. The poem's opening lines remind readers that the *beau monde's* tolerance extended only to women whose discrete affairs allowed them to avoid scandal. Thus, Terpsichore's circumspect concealment of her promiscuity ("long misdeemed a maid" [3]) in accordance with Melbourne's "decencys" ensures her continued social acceptance. Byron alludes to this concept in lines 10-14, noting that

If but thy coats are reasonably high;
Thy breast – if bare enough – requires no shield.
Dance forth – *sans armour* – thou shalt take the field,
And own – impregnable to *most* assaults,
Thy not too lawfully begotten 'Waltz'.

The juxtaposition of bared female breast and shield is reminiscent of Britannia, but, unlike this figure of martial virtue, Terpsichore's only means of protection is her "coat." However, this garment, the protective symbol of a good reputation, is all a libidinous woman needs, rendering her "impregnable to *most* assaults." The poet stresses the sexual nature of this protection, playing upon the aural similarities of armour and *amour* to subvert the established meaning of this popular trope of impenetrable female virtue, surreptitiously supplanting notions of "chastity" with "reputation." For it is only the pretence of

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virtue that is required by the *ton*, a distinction subtly suggested by the contrast between clothing and nakedness, the “high” coat of an unsullied public character concealing the “bare” bosom of private lechery. (This notion is reprised later in the poem, when Terpsichore swoops in with her “longest petticoat” [122] to cover the libidinous Waltz’s nakedness and preserve her reputation.)

42. This reading is supported by the poem’s epigraph, lines on the goddess Diana dancing taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Lending little to the poem with regards to “Germanophobia” and anti-waltzing rhetoric, the choice of these lines begins to make sense in the context of aristocratic sociosexual mores advocating the need to conceal private promiscuity behind public propriety. The figure of Diana is an intriguingly dichotomous one. An overtly sensual pagan goddess, she is an object of unwanted male lust, often portrayed as totally or partially nude, yet she is also ever chaste, the virgin huntress. Although appearing to be the inverse embodiment of the carnal code of Regency Society—her physical, public appearance is blatantly sexual, yet her internal, private morality is virginal—her reputation for chastity is such that she can dance naked and remain unharmed, in a similar fashion to the libidinous Terpsichore.

43. Yet, as ever with Byron, there are multiple layers of meaning complicating our assessment of the subject, for waltzing not only is the anthropomorphised daughter of the muse of dancing and a metaphor for adultery but also functions as a dangerous threat to public reputations, fostering a false sense of private intimacy which encourages a reckless disregard for fashionable proprieties. Through *The Waltz*, Byron gives voice to some of his

anxieties about public exposure and scandal in the wake of the Lamb affair, and mocking descriptions of willing cuckolds and sluttish wives are therefore accompanied by a warning—not of hellfire and damnation such as one might expect from a *real* attack on aristocratic immorality—but rather of the ruin and ridicule adulterers would suffer if exposed.

44. Thus, the poem's descriptions of the sweaty fumbings of "hands which may freely range in public sight" (115) are redolent of a quivering indignation that, like Samuel Rogers's outrage, is directed against the public, rather than sexual, nature of these activities. For when hands are "promiscuously applied" in a recklessly "liberal" and "lavish" (l.114) fashion before a host of prurient onlookers, couples fatally compromise themselves:

Till some might marvel, with the modest Turk,

If "nothing follows all this palming work"? (210-211)

The note to these lines refers to "*Morier's Travels*." However, readers might also perceive unattributed Shakespearean allusions in the emphasis on "palming," which recalls the "paddling palms" of supposedly adulterous wives in *Othello* (II.i.205, 251-252) and *A Winter's Tale* (I.ii.11-12). This deft incorporation of a Shakespearean trigger for destructive spousal jealousy emphasises the importance of circumspection. The same warning appears in the letter. Familiar with the "modish manners" of the *ton*'s sociosexual proprieties, Mrs Hornem ensured her husband remained ignorant of the affair that produced her adulterine son. Returning to London, however, the exhilarating whirl of the waltz sees her recklessly expose herself to spousal suspicions as she wanders around with her lover "quam familiariter." (Yet unlike the vengeful Othello, Hornem, in accordance with cultural conventions, simply leaves his wife to her own devices while he pursues other women.)

45. Childers suggests that to “the puritan in Byron the boldness with which supposedly ‘nice’ women exhibited themselves while waltzing showed how little they valued their reputation and treasured their virtue” (86). However, Byron’s aversion is arguably rooted less in the realities of female virtue than in the brazen familiarity with which men’s hands “wander undisplaced” (193) around “the yielded waist” (192), for this public display increases the risk of an affair being exposed. In response to this threat, the poem offers a warning to the “nimble Nymph” (15) and “single gentlemen” who seek to “snatch another’s bride” (103-106). Hornem urges these dancers to avoid excessive displays of particularity, sagely suggesting giving “caresses to a score” (245) so as not to incite suspicions.³⁰ The “Seductive Waltz” likewise urges caution, as she and the narrator, in turn, warn the reader of the threat posed by brightly lit, tightly packed ballrooms full of inquisitive eyes:

Hands which may freely range in public sight,
Where ne’er before – but – pray “put out the light”.
Methinks the glare of yonder chandelier
Shines much too far – or I am much too near;
And true, though strange – Waltz whispers this remark,
“My slippery steps are safest in the dark!” (115-120)

The carnal sensuality of the sibilant “slippery steps” is reinforced by the implication of furtive night-time traversing of corridors. The safety such stealthy movement grants is underscored by the fact that the muse “with due decorum, halts” (121) this description, tacitly respecting such privacies and protecting lovers from exposure (a device Byron later repeatedly uses to similar effect in *Don Juan*). The necessity of such discretion is reiter-

ated by a direct quotation from *Othello*, “pray put out the light” (V.ii.7), though, in the poem—as in Byron’s milieu—the penalty for exposed adultery is merely social, rather than physical, death.

46. Byron once observed that adulterers should take care to “meet as strangers” at balls, for even private events often had journalists present. This, as Edward Copeland has established, was because press exposure was a desirable social currency in the early 1800s.³¹ Although this impulse waned by the 1830s, becoming more of a *parvenu* obsession, in the previous decades, newspapers included details of “my lord’s dinner and my lady’s ball” as a matter of course, as Robert Southey highlights in his amusing 1807 travelogue, *Letters from England*, describing how “the parties who danced together [are] exhibited like the characters of a drama in an English bill of the play.” These details are accompanied by “a string of puns, and a paragraph of scandal” (341-342, 449). *The Waltz* stresses the ruinous consequences of this sort of exposure in the following lines, reminding readers that those who waltz together risk having their names coupled in the *Morning Post*, resulting in public scandal and divorce:

The Earl of – Asterix, -- and Lady –Blank;

Sir – such a one – with those of Fashion’s host,

For those blest surnames – vide “Morning Post”;

Or if for that *impartial* print too late

Search Doctors Commons six months from my date. (203-207)

This warning is enhanced by the replication of the arch elisions of identity employed by newspapers (avoiding libel but allowing identification), incorporating yet another kind of adultery discourse, the gossip column, into the poem.³²

47. Journalistic modes are also incorporated into the letter, where Hornem's suspicions are reflected in the shift in register as he ceases to describe his wife as "poor dear Mrs Hornem" and instead resorts to crude sexualised imagery, transposing horizontal copulatory actions into the vertical dance. As he watches them go "at it again," he likens his wife and her dance partner to "two cockchafers spitted on the same bodkin." This repellent image is at the same time markedly sensual, with the juxtaposition of "cock" and "spitted" and the phallic impression of two animals penetrated by a single thrust. Double *entendres* such as this were common in newspapers, which often employed bestial and botanical euphemisms when regaling readers with scurrilous titbits.³³ The choice of the cockchafer, a large brown beetle with destructively voracious appetites, emphasises the text's underlying warning, intimating that Mrs Hornem and her hussar are likewise unable to control their sexual impulses, leading to their exposure. This imagery encourages readers to envisage pinned insect specimens on a display board, a stark depiction of the miseries exposed lovers endure. Alternatively, they might recall the contemporary children's game of pinning a cockchafer to a piece of string and watching it "dance" as it tries to escape its "wretched agony,"³⁴ equating this callous delight with the thoughtless cruelty of the public appetite for sexual scandal and the pitiless venality of the press who cater to it.

48. Shortly after the poem was published, the merits of his own warning were vividly illustrated for Byron when Lamb, infuriated at his indifference to her waltzing with other men at Lady Heathcote's ball, "broke a Glass, & Scratched herself" (qtd. in Gross 142-143). Byron notes with weary resignation that her actions were "in the mouth of everyone" (*BLJ* 3:72) and, as she herself ruefully admitted, "in all the papers" (Douglass, *Selected Letters* 204). Publications offered gleefully malicious accounts of a *contretemps* between "Lord B." and "Lady C.L.," the elided references slyly coupled with puns concerning how the dejected noblewoman sought:

With horn-handled knife,

To kill a tender lamb as dead as mutton. ("Scandalum Magnatum" 150-151)

Even Byron's friend Thomas Moore could not resist exaggerating such a titillating piece of gossip, writing to one correspondent describing how "that unfortunate Tilburina of [Byron's] went mad in white satin at Lady Heathcote's" and attempted "Suicide" (qtd. in Vail 65).

49. Byron was not alone in foregrounding the risks to female reputations posed by the sexualised waltz. A similar viewpoint appears in antiquarian Sir Henry Englefield's highly popular poem "Waltzing," written between 1810 and 1812:

What! The girl I adore by another embraced?

What! The balm of her breath shall another man taste?

What! Press'd in the whirl by another bold knee?

What! Panting, reeling on another than me?

Sir, she's yours – you have brushed from the grape its soft blue;

From the rosebud you've shaken its tremulous dew;

What you've touched you may take, pretty waltzer, adieu.

Widely reproduced, the poem reiterates the notion that any woman waltzing is (or will be) sexually fallen. For, as Byron laconically observes, few believe that “The breast thus publicly resigned to man” will be able to “resist him” when in “private” (214-215). In Fig. 3, an illustrated print of Englefield's poem, the open fondling of the woman's breast underscores the poetic argument regarding the damage waltzing can do to a woman's reputation because everyone automatically assumes she is sexually available (“What you've touched you may take”).³⁵



Figure 3: *Waltzing!*, Sir Henry Englefield (engraver unknown). New York City Public Library Digital Collections, [b12165961](https://www.nypl.org/digital/collection/b12165961)

50. Significantly, Caroline Lamb's commonplace book contains Englefield's lines alongside a passage from *The Waltz*, leading to Susan Normington's mistaken attribution of Englefield's poem to Lamb herself (81). Although erroneously deeming the anonymously published satire "too coarse" to be Byron's, Lamb nevertheless shrewdly identified the pronounced parallels between Englefield's verses and her former lover's, the latter adapting and amplifying Englefield's themes of sexual jealousy, corruption, and rejection in the following lines:

To press the hand so pressed by none but thine;
To gaze upon the eye which never met
Another's ardent look without regret;
Approach the lip, which all, without restraint,
Come near enough – if not to touch – to taint. (239-243)³⁶

These lines imply that the excessive and unbridled displays of desire encouraged by waltzing will irrevocably damage the fragile delicacy of the female reputation, subtly invoking Englefield's imagery of bruised grapes and crushed rosebuds. Both passages reflect on sexual jealousy, but while the older poet deals with the loss of a lover's regard, Byron operates in an altogether darker register, describing the ruination of a woman's reputation by her careless lover. The reiterated negative absences "without restraint" and "without regret," coupled with the drawling emphasis on "taint," produce an oppressive menace absent from Englefield's verses, and Byron's skilful incorporation of contemporary socio-sexual commentary enriches lines structured around Englefield's more conventional floral allusions.

51. Bruhm finds it “strange” that *The Waltz* bemoans the erosion of sexual morals (23), while Dyer and Childers view the censorious denunciation of waltzing as almost puritanical—once again, Byron’s tongue-in-cheek parodies of popular discourses are misread as genuine, for it is not the loss of chaste modesty which the poem warns against but rather its protective pretence, the “palisades by dames erected/Whose Virtue lies in never being detected” (*Don Juan* XIV: 61). In her monograph on the treatment of adultery in the law and literature of the late nineteenth century, Barbara Leckie offers the perspicacious observation that “A sense of Englishness, in other words caught up with the sense of nation, was articulated in the context of the *invisibility* of adultery in England” (26). Waltzing makes passion visible, and this is Byron’s focus. By making adultery visible, discarding the protective proprieties of the *beau monde*, his poem mockingly suggests that waltzers are, in a sense, directly undermining what it means to be English. Childers makes this point in the context of England’s literary culture, but it is equally true of the aristocracy’s sexual culture.

52. The worst transgressor is the sexually incontinent Prince Regent. Here, we return to Childers’ view of the waltz as a metaphor for “the moral, cultural and political degeneracy of Regency England” under the aegis of a dissipated German princeling (93). In 1812, the vulgarity of the waltz was, as Childers points out, the embodiment of the over-loud, over-sexed Hanoverian court, “vulgar to the point of immorality,” epitomised by their corpulent, corseted leader, with his gaudy regimentals and hearty guffaw (83). A “votary” of the waltz, Byron’s Regent is equally a votary of adultery and brazenly indifferent to social

niceties in his pursuit of this “lawless contact warm.” Rather than discrete dalliances “in the dark,” the Regent thrusts his “princely paunch” (195) suggestively against women’s bodies on the dancefloor (in a manner recalling Lamb’s watercolour sketch), leaving on-lookers in no doubt as to the nature of his desires. Formerly, when “Some Potentate” (186) led “forth the ready dame,” her “rising flush” could be “mistaken for a blush” (188-189), but this virtuous pretence cannot be maintained by the Regent’s lovers. Thanks to his blatant pursuit and discarding of fashionable niceties, the delicate mantle of the maidenly “blush” is irrevocably transformed into the ruddier “flush” of sexual arousal, as visibly damning as Hester Prynne’s lurid “A” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Worse still, the Regent encourages his cronies, “ –F-tz—t—k, Sh-r—d-n and many more” (217), to follow suit.

53. *The Waltz* directly rebukes the Regent (“thou my Prince!” [218]), explaining that, while it is perfectly acceptable “to love the lovely beldames,” his “sovereign taste and will” (218) must be tempered with discretion. His followers are included in the following address:

But ye – who never felt a single thought
For what our Morals are to be, or ought;
Who wisely wish the charms you view to reap,
Say – would you make those beauties quite so cheap? (230-233)

The poet castigates those who “never felt a single thought/For what our Morals are to be,” the inclusive phrase “our Morals” reiterating his own adherence to the *ton*’s sociosexual values. In ignoring these codes of carnal conduct, the Regent and his set make the women

they seduce “cheap.” This single word brilliantly summarises these women's degradation into vendible objects. They are socially tarnished like cheap plate; their husbands will launch criminal conversation proceedings “where juries cast up what a wife is worth” (*Don Juan* I: 64); the press will sell scurrilous stories about them; and their images will appear in print shop windows to be gawped at by the vulgar masses. “If such thou lovest,” states the poet censoriously, “love her then no more” (244). The poem starts with apostrophes to Terpsichore, her daughter, and Germany, but it concludes with an explicit directive to the Regent and an implicit instruction to the reader regarding the vital importance of the protective sociosexual proprieties embraced by the *beau monde*. After all, the poet sapiently notes, adulterous lust is inevitable, so caution must be instilled: “For prurient nature still will storm the breast – *Who*, tempted thus, can answer for the rest?” (228-229).

54. Gillian Russell notes that adultery in Georgian Britain was “based on distinctions between public and private selves” (419). *The Waltz* reproaches the Regent and other waltzers for destabilising these distinctions through their wilful disregard for sociosexual proprieties, as “hands promiscuously applied” produce a dangerously obvious “Flush in the cheek and languish in the eyes.” Reading the letter and the poem together, it becomes clear that Byron deliberately entwines the themes of adultery and cultural adulteration, suggesting that the brash behaviours of the promiscuous Hanoverians and their followers are undermining the established sociosexual mores of the equally libidinous but rather more discreet *beau monde*. These stanzas playfully suggest that discrete infidelity is an essential part of Englishness and, in a slyly satirical inversion of anti-adultery rhetoric, subvers-

ively imply that to be adulterous is to be a good Englishman or Englishwoman. This allows Byron to create a parodic inversion of priggish middling class morality and use it to criticise the brazenly indiscrete Regent for being a bad Englishman (in more ways than one), and surreptitiously ridicule the *beau monde* for making adultery so central to their class identity and social culture.

55. Part of the difficulty in locating the targets of Byron's satire in *The Waltz* (and indeed much of his later poetry) stems from the broader shift in cultural norms. The sociosexual contexts explored in this article go some way towards recovering the contemporary common ground between poet and reader upon which Byron relied. However, it would be erroneous to assume that a "complete context" could be constructed for such a conceptually diverse and multi-faceted poem, written by an astute social commentator capable of espousing multiple conflicting convictions at one and the same time. This latter ability contributes to the sense that the target of Byron's satire is being re-determined throughout *The Waltz* in a manner reminiscent of the exploratory nature of lyrical or meditative modes. This impression of transitional liminality allows for the supposition that the poet is perhaps "working through" his own position, with regards to both his personal socio-sexual mores and class identification and his poetic principles relating to the nature of satire as he experiments with an idiosyncratically heteroglossic approach.

56. As Clara Tuite observes, "Byron's literary form is always intertextually and socially grounded" (*Context* 7). This is especially true of *The Waltz*, which is shaped by a complex

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mixture of political allegiances, personal inclinations, middle-class prudery and aristocratic propriety, all of which are refracted through the fictional persona of Horace Hornem.

This figure functions as a “stalking horse” for Byron, allowing him to pretend to endorse anti-waltzing rhetoric even as he exposes its fallacies and to satirise the complex socio-sexual mores of the fashionable world in which he now finds himself. The poem thus offers a fine example of what Jones calls “deflected satire,” mocking middling- and upper-class readers on two interlinked yet oppositional levels—the one for its prim moral strictures and the other for its promiscuity. The real poet is aware of this dual rhetorical irony though Hornem, apparently, is not.

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¹ All quotations are from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J. McGann (Oxford, UP, 1980–1993).

² Cochran 1, Douglass *Biography* 105, Tonioplaphol 106.

³ See, for example, Knowles, Fuchs, and Wilson.

⁴ British library. Holland House papers, 51560/177.

⁵ In another 1813 satire, “The Devil’s Walk,” the peripatetic Lucifer goes to “a royal Ball” (193) in London and is so horrified by the “perfectly carnal” (222) dance that he resolves to ban it (“Against it I would warn all” [220]). In having the devil forbid the waltz, Byron not only displays a characteristically insightful understanding of the tropes with which he toys but also intensifies the transgressive nature of the dance, which is so inherently sinful even Lucifer is appalled.

⁶ Long before the waltz became *de rigueur*, the complexity of *contradances* such as the minuet meant that ball-room dancing was considered a spectator sport. This produced the cultural imperative that only those who were “well shaped” and “undeformed” should dance while those with “natural defects” were expected to watch from the sidelines. In “Treatise on The Art of Dancing” (1785), the author states that “if a man walks lame, he is to be pitied; if he dances lame he is to be laughed at.” “I mention this”, he concludes with spurious sympathy, “to shew how absurd it is for deformed persons to dance; they are sure of being either laughed at or pitied as idiots” (254). Although this text was published in 1785, these conventions persisted into the 1810s, and Cruikshank’s *Royal Brothel* (fig. 2) includes a small female figure lurking by the dancefloor, her crooked back and sturdy boots suggesting the reason for her exclusion. This figure conveys a similar wistfulness to that evoked by Thomas Moore’s tale of young Byron as the “poor lame boy” lurking on the sidelines at a Nottinghamshire ball while the girl he loves dances with another man (I:27).

⁷ See “Thoughts on the Fashionable Vice” (479-480).

⁸ “A Corruption of Morals ensued that communicated itself from the Great, down to the lowest Classes of the Vulgar, with the most pernicious rapidity” states John Andrews (4).

⁹ John Bowles fears that the “degeneracy of the age” would sap “the dauntless intrepidity, and the invincible constancy” which are “indigenous to the people of this island,” leaving them vulnerable to invasion and political unrest (xiv).

¹⁰ Adam Sibbit anxiously observes that the “crime of adultery seems to prevail to such a degree, as to threaten the very existence of society” (4).

¹¹ “*Modesty* is the brightest Jewel which adorns the Fair Sex”; therefore young women must prioritise “the Regulation of [their] Conduct in this dangerous and degenerate Age” for the good of the nation, argues the author of *An Essay on Modern Gallantry* (39).

¹² Anti-adultery discourses have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. See, for example, Andrew, Runge, and Russell.

¹³ Byron offers a similar message in his note to line 127, referring to Egyptian dancing girls “who do for hire what Waltz doth gratis.”

¹⁴ For example, “Thoughts on Fashionable Vice” (479-480) and *Reflections* (4, 6, 59, 70, 81, 83).

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¹⁵ For example, Comber's *Adultery Analyz'd* denounces both the "importation of French principles" and the "introduction of German plays and novels," blaming them for the rise of adultery in Britain (46).

¹⁶ For more on the reception of this play, see Russell (436-439).

¹⁷ *The New Review* (June 1813, I: 636-638; Reiman 5: 1929).

¹⁸ For example, McGann suggests that Byron "echoes the widely held opinion of the dance as a sign of indecorum, even depravity" (3: 396).

¹⁹ Byron's limited knowledge of what he labels the "modish manners" of "Fashion's Host" (20) is evident in the slightly shamefaced tenor of a letter he writes in 1811 declining an invitation to stay in London on the grounds that he "should feel sadly at a loss amongst Countesses and Maids of Honour" (*BLJ* 2: 89).

²⁰ British Library Add. MS 51560 f.164.

²¹ The choice of name subtly parodies the anxieties of anti-waltzing campaigners, convinced of an intimate connection between waltzing and infidelity amongst the aristocracy. We find a similar insinuation in the linguistic resonance between Mrs Hornem's fashionable cousin, the Countess Waltzaway, and the poem's sneering denunciation of sexually suspect "Countesses and queans."

²² The play was a favourite of Byron's (*BLJ* 3: 42; 11: 101).

²³ For example, "Cornuto," a commentator for the *Morning Chronicle*, writes a letter exploring the origins of the term "cuckold", and admits that "it has long been whispered in the gay world" that he himself bears a "luxuriantly branching" set of "horns" (143-150).

²⁴ Cochran claims this line refers purely to bribery and patronage (54), but the emphasis on "law" and the clear distinction from "native brass" indicates Byron is referring to financial awards in Criminal Conversation suits. For more on Byron's poetic games with this legal adultery discourse, see Paterson-Morgan.

²⁵ Marie Maclean describes the paternal acceptance of adulterine offspring as a common trope in the adultery literature because they are more handsome, stronger, or wittier than the legitimate son. Maclean offers examples from Shakespeare's *King John* and *King Lear*, and Hornem's expectation that imported "hock" will improve British "stock" can be read as part of this tradition (19-21). She further notes that some men even relished the benefits of a higher-ranking biological father. Byron reprises the trope in *Mazeppa* in the sly intimation that the cuckolded Count would not have minded his wife's adultery if it had been with royalty ("perchance a King/Had reconciled him to the thing" [354-55]).

²⁶ For example, Lord Melbourne clearly suspected that William Lamb was not his son and gave him a much smaller allowance than he gave the previous (legitimate) heir Pennistone, but does not publicly reject him or his wife's other adulterine children.

²⁷ In a letter to Murray, Byron recalls a fight between George Lamb and Scrope Berdmore Davies. "Sir – said George – he *hinted at my illegitimacy*". "Yes," said Scrope – "I called him a damned adulterous bastard" (*BLJ* 6: 138).

²⁸ Byron ruefully informs Melbourne that "*We* are at present in a slight perplexity owing to an event which certainly did not enter my calculations", though his concerns proved groundless (*BLJ* 3:40).

²⁹ Cochran claims that the poet was "unable to formulate any consistent attitude to waltzing" in his poem (1).

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³⁰ This message is strikingly reminiscent of lines that Caroline Lamb wrote a year earlier:

I likewise waltz & think no wrong
For O sees harm but I see none
For if you do not waltz too long
& turn the same with every one

How can there be the least of evil. (British Library. Holland house papers, M.S. 51560/177)

Although these lines appear in Lamb's private correspondence, it is possible she kept a copy to show Byron. Alternatively, both poems could reflect the kind of worldly wisdom doled out by the experienced Melbourne. After all, many contemporary texts note the impropriety of dancing with the same man more than twice at a ball, while dancing the new waltz was considered tantamount to a public declaration of desire

³¹ Maria Edgeworth mocks this obsession in *Belinda* when the fashionable Lady Delacour demands dresses "that will make a fine paragraph" (35).

³² Byron's heteroglossic style is highlighted by the parallels between these lines and a letter by Jane Austen. "A hint of it, with Initials, was in yesterday's Courier", she writes excitedly, informing her sister of a new adultery scandal, "Mr Moore guessed it to be Ld Sackville, believing there was no other Viscount S. in the peerage, & so it proved" (85).

³³ In 1785, *The Scots Magazine* included a horticultural glossary with entries such as "Cuckledom – A *coniform* plant which grows in several *beds*, and has been found to flourish successfully in *shrubberies*" (47: 452).

³⁴ "The Cockchafer" in Priscilla Wakefield's collection of moral tales for children, *Juvenile Anecdotes Founded on Facts* (Harvey and Darnton, 1825 100-101).

³⁵ This perception of a waltzing woman as undesirably promiscuous and therefore undesirable is taken up in Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* (1814), when the lovelorn Mr Percy mutters the poem's last three lines under his breath as he stalks away, offended that the fashionable Miss Hauton (a pun on *haut ton*) is waltzing with another man (73).

³⁶ Byron described Englefield as "mighty man in the *blue* circles & a very clever man any where" (*BLJ* 5: 58).