Chapter Five

Picturing Byron’s Italy and Italians: Finden’s Illustrations to Byron’s Life and Works

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William and Edward Finden successfully marketed Lord Byron’s life and literary works in sleek, well-illustrated packages, including Landscape and Portrait Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron (3 vols., 1833–1834), with a text by collaborator William Brockedon. The Findens published around the same time their Landscape Illustrations of the Bible (1836) and a periodical called The Oriental Annual, or Scenes in India (1834–1840). The latter work promotes British chauvinistic attitudes to the Middle East, to southern Europe in general, and to Italy in particular. Thus, it is unsurprising that Landscape and Portrait Illustrations of the Life of Byron employs Byron as a vehicle to promote an idea of Italy in which, as Joseph Luzzi has said, the reader can imagine the country as a repository of a great civilization, one that would be better-off without the inconvenience of contemporary Italians themselves. Many writers, including Goethe, Staël, and Foscolo, but also Shelley and Byron, participated “in constructing their common European heritage” by creating this “Romantic” myth about Italy (Luzzi 54), and my essay grapples with this charge against Byron. In some ways his work was twisted by Finden and Brockedon, who elided Byron’s strong engagement with the politics and daily life of Italy while exaggerating the superfeminine aspects of his women protagonists. At the same time, it must be conceded that Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage
and other Byron works often contrast Italy’s fabled history with its contemporary cultural malaise. Nonetheless, Finden’s and Brockedon’s *Landscape and Portrait Illustrations* is an exploitative work that evacuates most of Byron’s violence and energy, focusing upon Orientalized females, ruins, and rustic scenes. The contemporary countryside and city environs are depicted as “the culturally impoverished antithesis of [their] own illustrious heritage,” as Luzzi says (54). In this, Finden and Brockedon have done an injustice to the poet, who read and spoke Italian well, and engaged the Risorgimento to the degree that he risked his own life at times.

In all their collections, William and Edward Finden each contributed some of the pictures, but commissioned most of them to other artists, including some, like John Frederick Lewis and Miss Corbaux, whose careers were shaped by the public appetite for Orientalist fantasies. They had previously published *Landscape Illustrations of the Waverley Novels* (1830) and would go on to engrave and print a two volume work titled *Tableaux of National Character, Beauty, and Costume* (1843) with specially commissioned tales, such as Leigh Hunt’s “Albania—The Love Letter.” Landscapes in Finden’s and Brockedon’s *Landscape and Portrait Illustrations of the Life of Byron* stand beside portraits of real people from Byron’s life, like Teresa Guiccioli and Margarita Cogni. More often, however, the pictures offer female characters from Byron’s works, many of whom are drawn from Greek and Italian settings. Images from Byron’s works published here were afterward augmented by additional portraits printed in *The Gallery of Byron Beauties* (1836), a strand of Orientalist fabric woven through many publications of the 1830s and 1840s in England. The portraits emphasize exotic themes that had helped to make Byron’s early work, such as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), popular. Included, for example is an image of the “Maid of Athens” from lines first published in *Childe Harold*. Finden also gives a portrait of Parisina, the young lady who “walks in the shadow of night” in a poem the first verse of which Byron had given to Isaac Nathan as part of their *Hebrew Melodies* project in 1815–1816.¹ Parisina listens breathlessly for the approaching steps of her lover gliding “through the foliage thick, / And her cheek grows pale—and her heart beats quick” (*Complete Poetical Works* 3:359). Brockedon’s description of her glosses over the violence of her story, in which her husband Azo (based upon the Marquis d’Este of Ferrara) puts his bastard son to death for having had an incestuous liaison with her, leaving her to go mad with the grief of erotomania. A similar elision of specifics characterizes Finden and Brockedon’s entry describing Theresa, from *Mazeppa*, a poem whose eponymous hero (a