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http://orcid.org/ 0000-0002-0572-2673
MONIKA COGHEN
Uniwersytet Jagielloński
e-mail: monika.coghen@uj.edu.pl

Man and Horse in Byron's Poetry

Abstract: In his poetry and in letters Byron occasionally writes of horses and uses the imagery of horse riding. This essay examines Byron's representation of human-horse interactions and the ways in which the poet deploys the images of horse riding in *The Giaour*, *Mazeppa,* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. I would like to suggest that Byron's representation of horses may be seen as figuratively reflective of his poetic development from the passion-spurred ride of the Giaour to the harmonious bond between horse and human that Mazeppa learns through his wild ride.

Keywords: Byron, horse, *The Giaour*, *Mazeppa*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Abstrakt: W swoich dziełach poetyckich i epistolografii Byron wiele razy sięga po metaforykę jazdy konnej, a konie często pojawiają się w jego utworach. Celem artykułu jest analiza ukazania jazdy konnej oraz relacji pomiędzy koniem a człowiekiem w poematach takich jak *Giaur*, *Mazeppa* i *Wędrówki Childe Harolda*. Obrazowanie koni w twórczości poety może być odczytane metaforycznie jako odbicie jego rozwoju poetyckiego – od szalonego, kierowanego namiętnością galopu Giaura do harmonijnej więzi pomiędzy koniem a człowiekiem, której Mazeppa uczy się dzięki doświadczeniu swej dzikiej jazdy.

Słowa kluczowe: Byron, koń, *Giaur*, *Mazeppa*, *Wędrówki Childe Harolda*

Byron was an excellent horse-rider; his club foot impaired his walking, and riding was one of his favourite physical activities. He often associated riding with writing, which is clearly visible in his letter to Francis Hodgson, where he describes his life in Ravenna in winter 1820: "I ride and write, and have here some Italian friends and connexions of both sexes, horses and dogs, and the usual means and appliances of life, which passes chequered as usual (& with all) with good and evil (*BLJ* 7, 252). [1] Riding and writing work for Byron well together, which is stressed by alliteration and assonance, verging on internal rhyme. When the win-

[1] Byron to Francis Hodgson, from Ravenna, December 22nd 1820, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London, John Murray, 1973–1994), 7: 252 (hereafter cited in text as *BLJ*).

ter weather in Ravenna got worse and made riding inadvisable, he noted in his journal: "It is so far lucky that I have a literary turn; – but it is very tiresome not to be able to stir out, in comfort, on any horse but Pegasus, for so many days" (Jan. 12, 1821; *BLJ* 8, 22). Here, as on many other occasions, he makes use of the traditional metaphor of riding Pegasus used to refer to poetic composition through the ages.[2]

Riding and writing are also brought together by the sense of rhythm and the urge for control. Nigel Leask (2011, 118) points out that Byron uses a metaphor of a "wild ride" to refer to Romantic poetry. He quotes a passage from Byron's letter to Thomas Moore (February 2, 1818): "the next generation (from the quantity and facility of imitation) will tumble and break their necks off our Pegasus, who runs away with us"(*BLJ* 6, 10).[3] This reads as serious criticism of "a wrong revolutionary poetical system–or systems," represented by "Scott–Southey–Wordsworth–Moore–Campbell" and Byron himself, which the poet presented in his letter to John Murray (September 17, 1817; *BLJ* 5, 265), and which Murray, must have mentioned to Moore. Yet if one reads more of the letter to Moore, one can see that Byron extends this "wild ride" image (characteristically combining it with a sailing metaphor) and actually offers some praise of Romantic poetic horsemanship:

> I called Crabbe and Sam [Samuel Rogers] the fathers of present Poesy; and said, that I thought–except them–*all of "us youth"* were on a wrong tack. But I never said that we did not sail well. Our fame will be hurt by *admiration* and *imitation*. When I say *our*, I mean *all* (Lakers included), except the postscript of the Augustans. The next generation (from the quantity and facility of imitation) will tumble and break their necks off our Pegasus, who runs away with us; but we keep the *saddle*, because we broke the rascal and can ride. But though easy to mount, he is the devil to guide; and the next fellows must go back to the riding-school and the manège, and learn to ride the "great horse" (*BLJ* 6, 9–11).

Byron does not deny poetic/riding/sailing skills to himself and his contemporary poets (including Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey). He suggests that they have managed to tame Pegasus and can ride him though they are not quite able to control his course. It is their admirers and imitators, whom he clearly finds annoying, that will not be able stay in the saddle.

Byron's metaphor evokes Alexander Pope's well-known passage in *Essay on Criticism*:

> 'Tis more to guide than spur the Muse's steed,
> Restrain his Fury, than provoke his speed;
> The winged courser, like a generous horse,
> Shows most true mettle when you check his course.
> (Pope [1711] 1979, Part I, 84–87)

[2] See, for instance, Byron's letter to Elizabeth Pigot: "I have only just dismounted from my *Pegasus*, which has prevented me from descending to plain prose in an epistle of greater length to your *fair* self" (September 1806; *BLJ* 1, 100).

[3] This quotation comes from the letter addressed to Thomas Moore, and not to John Murray as Leask writes.

According to Byron, the problem for him and his contemporaries lies not in the very act of riding Pegasus but in "checking his course" or in Byron's words "guiding" him properly.

In horsemanship one of the tools used to control a horse is a whip. Characteristically, we have two portraits of Byron with a whip in his hand. Marianne Hunt's paper silhouette cutting, now on the cover of the second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, represents Byron after "his daily ride at Pisa and Genoa." He is sitting with his legs crossed on a chair, the riding crop nonchalantly held over his arm. In one of Robert Seymour's illustrations to William Parry's book, *The Last Days of Lord Byron* (1824), he is shown holding a whip while playing with his beloved dog Lyon in Missolonghi, though the whip seems to play the role of a stick to entertain the dog. One may speculate whether this holding onto the device that is used to guide a horse may be quite telling of the man who "must get on horseback to quiet [him]" (Byron to Thomas Moore, May 14,1821; *BLJ* 8, 117). Riding releases passion, but man should be able to direct the course of his steed. If for Byron in 1813 poetry was "the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earth-quake" (*BLJ* 3, 179) it becomes apparent that – unlike a well-trained horse – the volcanic lava cannot be properly checked, and the poet feels that his Pegasus has taken him on a wild ride.

In this essay I am going to examine the ways in which Byron deploys the imagery of horse-riding and depicts human-horse relationships in *The Giaour*, *Mazeppa*, and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, poems which are illustrative of his poetic development towards the writing of *Don Juan*.

We are first introduced to the Giaour, the protagonist of Byron's 1813 Turkish tale, through the depiction of a speedy horse ride, which explicitly is a reflection of the mind driven by the passions:

Who thundering comes on blackest steed?

> With slacken'd bit and hoof of speed,
> Beneath the clattering iron's sound
> The cavern'd echoes wake around
> In lash for lash, and bound for bound:
> (*The Giaour*, 180–185)[4]

The horse is described as "blackest," and throughout the poem its blackness is emphasized ("his jet-black steed" (469), "his raven charger" (245), and the fisherman-speaker identifies the Giaour "by his jet-black barb" (614). The blackness of the horse corresponds to the condition of the Giaour's heart, and indeed he confirms it later when he speaks of "[t]he blackness of my bosom" (1199). The opening rhetorical question with its ambiguous syntax almost merges the horse and its rider into one figure, which could be seen as that of a centaur. Ann Game suggests that it is "probably the most ubiquitous figure" for "an imagining of the

[4] All references to Byron's poetry are Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–1993). Byron's works are cited by their title. The edition is referred to as CPW.

connections […] between horse and rider and cosmos" inherent in riding (2011, 3).

The point about the Giaour is, however, that he is not in harmony with nature. He uses the lashes of his whip to speed the horse's course instead of gently controlling the animal. Though "[the] foam that streaks the courser's side, / Seems gather'd from the ocean-tide" (*The Giaour*, 185–186), the connection of the horseman with the sea is only illusory:

> Though weary waves are sunk to rest,
> There's none within his rider's breast,
> And though to-morrow's tempest lower,
> 'Tis calmer than thy heart, young Giaour!
> (*The Giaour*, 187–190)

The black steed of the Giaour is that of uncontrollable passion. As the rider urges the horse into the gallop, they merge together into an image of destructive wind:

> He came, he went, like the Simoom,
> That harbinger of fate and gloom,
> Beneath whose widely-wasting breath
> The very cypress droops to death –
> (*The Giaour*, 282–285)

The image of the Giaour and his horse brings to mind Plato's allegory of the psyche as the winged chariot in *Phaedrus*: the charioteer representing the rational part and the horses the passions. The Giaour's "blackest steed" might thus be seen as deriving from the Platonic tradition of representing unruly passions and desires. Uncontrollable, self-destructive love and hatred lie at the core of the tale which in its fragmentariness may be seen as representative of the "wild ride" of Romantic poetry.

While the steed of the Giaour immediately invites a metaphorical reading, the horses in Byron's 1819 poem *Mazeppa* are far more physical. As Leask (2011, 119) has shown, *Mazeppa* might be read as a poem about relationships between humans and horses, and above all, about horse and man becoming companion species, to use Donna Haraway's terminology. The poem is often seen as a transition poem between Byron's Oriental tales and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and his works in ottava rima such as *Beppo* and *Don Juan* (Marshall 1961, 121n2). Byron started the poem on 2 April 1817 and completed it on 26 September 1818, in the meantime working on Canto IV of *Childe Harold*, *Beppo*, and Canto I of *Don Juan* (on the composition of *Mazeppa*, see Lansdown 2020). Significantly, that was the period when he expressed his criticism of the Romantic poetics in the letters to Murray and Moore.

The poem draws upon Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII,* and possibly, as Hubert A. Babinski (1974, 9–14, 28–31) has argued, on André Dorville's novel *Memoires d'Anzéma* (1766). Human-horse interaction is not only the subject of Mazeppa's story, but constitutes an important part of the frame narrative. At the beginning of the poem, after the defeat at the battle of Poltava, the vanquished and wounded Charles XII is shown as a rider in pain; the horse on which he escaped

the battlefield is killed under him, and the horse given to him by Colonel Gieta "sinks after many a league/Of well sustain'd, but vain fatigue" (*Mazeppa*, 25–26). Together with his wearied commanders he is forced to seek rest. While observing the care with which the old Ukrainian hetman Mazeppa takes of his horse, he asks him how he has learnt his amazing horsemanship. Mazeppa's "dramatic monologue" (Marshall 1961, 120), in which he gives an account of his wild ride, answers Charles's request. One might thus note a parallel between the King's suffering when forced to flee on horseback and Mazeppa's ordeal. But while for the King the horse is a replaceable means of escape, Mazeppa has learnt the importance of forming a close bond with his steed.

As a young man, Mazeppa was a page to King John Casimir of Poland, and he passionately fell in love with Theresa, the young wife of a powerful aristocrat. As punishment for this affair the Count had him strapped to an unbroken Tartar horse and unleashed into the wild.

From the very beginning of Mazeppa's narrative we may observe his fascination with the wild courser:

> In truth, he was a noble steed,
> A Tartar of the Ukraine breed,
> Who look'd as though the speed of thought
> Were in his limbs; but he was wild,
> Wild as the wild-deer, and untaught,
> With spur and bridle undefiled –
> 'Twas but a day he had been caught;
> And snorting, with erected mane,
> And struggling fiercely, but in vain,
> In the full foam of wrath and dread,
> To me the desert-born was led.
> (*Mazeppa*, 359–369)

There is a noticeable parallel between the situation of the wild horse and Mazeppa as both are young, noble, and wild; both entrapped by human beings who wield power over them. In the description of his harrowing ride Mazeppa often uses the pronoun "we" to refer to himself and the steed, and he speaks of the horse as his horse:

> Away, away, my steed and I,
> Upon the pinions of the wind,
> All human dwellings left behind;
> We sped like meteors through the sky.
> (*Mazeppa*, 422–426)

Horse and human seem to be joined here for a moment in a cosmic flight. Christine Kenyon-Jones (2001, 36) has quoted this passage as an expression of Byron's desire to overcome his physical limitations by acquiring animal features as here "the wish is sublimated in the wild, dream-like sequence where boy and horse combine to become one centaur – or Pegasus-like creature." It is one of the moments in which Mazeppa and the horse seem to merge together in the narrative, which is otherwise an account of physical and mental suffering. However, each

ordeal they encounter seems to bring man and horse closer together. The experience of crossing a river is a good example of this common bond:

> Methought the dash of waves was nigh;
> There was a gleam too of the sky,
> Studded with stars; – it is no dream;
> The wild horse swims the wilder stream!
> The bright broad river's gushing tide
> Sweeps, winding onward, far and wide,
> And we are half-way, struggling o'er
> To yon unknown and silent shore.
> The waters broke my hollow trance,
> And with a temporary strength
> My stiffen'd limbs were rebaptized.
> My courser's broad breast proudly braves,
> And dashes off the ascending waves
> And onward we advance!
> (*Mazeppa*, 579–592)

The water revivifies Mazeppa and we share in his awe at "The wild horse swim[ming] the wilder stream." The young man participates in the horse's struggle to cross the river and voices his enthusiasm for this achievement. At this point he sounds like a bold rider, taking pride in his courser, and not a tormented victim. As Jerome McGann has noted, the regenerating effect of water is redolent of the revitalizing influence of rain on Coleridge's Ancient Mariner (CPW 4, 494). Yet although it might suggest a turning point in Mazeppa's ordeal, this is only a transient moment of revival. The challenge of swimming across the river and climbing onto the steep bank finally brings the horse to exhaustion. Though he manages to reach the desert land where no human beings might restrain his freedom, he expires on seeing a troop of wild horses. According to Babinski, the horse is Mazeppa's double: "the horse is Mazeppa and vice versa, so that Mazeppa's life seems to be bound to the horse's death" (1974, 36). At the sight of a human attached to the dead horse's back, the wild horses "backward to the forest fly,/ By instinct, from a human eye." Mazeppa complains, "They left me there, to my despair" (*Mazeppa*, 707–709) as though the horses were able to offer him some help. When he thinks he is going to share the fate of his horse, he is unexpectedly rescued by a Cossack maiden, who, as Peter Cochran (n.d., 25n67) has suggested, may remind him of his wild horse "with her black eyes so wild and free" (*Mazeppa*, 812).

Mazeppa's wild ride takes him from a corrupt human society where youth with its passions is subject to the tyranny of those in power to the land of wild and free horses, and of the Cossacks, famous for their horsemanship. He starts a new life among the Cossacks and eventually becomes their hetman, that is the chief military leader of the Cossack Hetmanate. The seventy-year old Mazeppa prioritizes the needs of his horse over his own comfort. Before he takes care of himself, he attends to his animal's needs:

> … first, outspent with this long course,
> The Cossack prince rubb'd down his horse,

And made for him a leafy bed,
And smooth'd his fetlocks and his mane,
And slack'd his girth, and stripp'd his rein,
And joy'd to see how well he fed;
For until now he had the dread
His wearied courser might refuse
To browze beneath the midnight dews.
(*Mazeppa*, 57–65)

Byron's ambiguous syntax makes both the hetman and his horse "outspent with this long course." The anaphora and alliteration stress his sympathetic care, which leads to his sense of relief and "joy," when he sees "his wearied courser" feed well. The situation is a reversal of the scene of the death of the wild horse of exhaustion. Mazeppa's "dizzy ride" has taught him how to treat horses with respect. He knows that their natural condition is to be "wild" and "free," so the bond between human and horse needs to be cherished.

His love for his steed is reciprocated:

But he was hardy as his lord,
And little cared for bed and board;
But spirited and docile too,
Whate'er was to be done, would do.
Shaggy and swift, and strong of limb,
All Tartar-like he carried him;
Obey'd his voice, and came at call,
And knew him in the midst of all.
(*Mazeppa*, 66–73)

The relationship between Mazeppa and his horse may be seen from the perspective of animal studies. As Haraway writes of her bond with her Australian shepherd dog, "[They] are training each other in the acts of communication [they] barely understand. [They] are constitutively companion species. [They] make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, [we] signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love" (Haraway 2008, 16).

One can also read Mazeppa's story in metaphorical terms, and see in the wild horse an allegory of sexual desire and in the naked man strapped to it a helpless rational self. Such a reading indeed is suggested in the poem when the old Mazeppa addresses Charles XII, known for his ascetic lifestyle, and says that unlike the king he has never been able to reign over his passions. He has, however, no regrets for pursuing his passion and would "give /The Ukraine back" to experience youth and his love affair again (305). As Leask (2011, 129) points out, "His wild ride has taught him to train, but not to suppress, his passions and his horses. In contrast to Charles XII, the puritanical Swedish warlord, the elderly Cossack represents the enduring values of Epicurus, a major theme in Byron's poetry."

But though he essentially seems to embrace passion, his final conclusion is an acceptance of fate:

> What mortal his own doom may guess?--
> Let none despond, let none despair!
> To-morrow the Borysthenes
> May see our coursers graze at ease
> Upon his Turkish banks, --and never
> Had I such welcome for a river
> As I shall yield when safely there.
> (*Mazeppa*, 853–859)

In the desperate situation of Charles XII and his chiefs, this sounds like an attempt at reassurance, ironically lost on the King, who he has fallen asleep. But it also reveals Mazeppa's acceptance of vicissitudes of life, and primacy of the bond with horses – whom he wants to see safely grazing on the eastern bank of the Dnipro – in his thinking.

The wild ride of Mazeppa may be seen as the opposite of the Giaour's ride though it echoes it in numerous ways. While the Giaour is a proficient rider, Mazeppa is completely unable to exercise any control over the horse to which he is bound; his attempts at freeing himself only spur the animal unaccustomed to humans to a wilder flight. Yet both their rides may be seen as expressive of wild, unrestrained passions. Byron's *Mazeppa* inspired numerous paintings by Romantic artists such as Théodore Géricault, Horace Vernet and Eugène Delacroix, who characteristically focused on the naked body of the man attached to the horse, thus stressing the erotic connotations of the ride. But while in *The Giaour* the passions of the protagonist are at the core of the poem, the frame narrative of *Mazeppa*, particularly the closing lines of the poem, directly addressing the reader – "And if ye marvel Charles forgot/To thank his tale, *he* wonder'd not,--/The king had been an hour asleep" (Mazeppa, 867–869) – provide an ironic distance to the story of the ordeal from Mazeppa's youth, whose plot elements – a love triangle, cruel punishment and revenge – recall those of the 1813 Fragment of a Turkish tale.

Reading Byron, I find Ann Game's insight in the nature of horse riding particularly insightful:

> Horse-lovers will tell you of dreaming of riding along the beach, galloping, as close to the waves as possible, with hooves splashing sea and sand. […] Sea and wave dreams and horse dreams attract each other. (Is this so powerfully effective because of the rhythmic movement that connects not only horse and human, but also earth, air and sea, a maternal sea of our origins?) And these dreams reverberate in and through riding (Game 2001, 2).

For Byron riding along a beach was one of his favourite exercises when he lived in Venice; in the letter to Moore quoted above, he writes of getting his horses to the Lido so that he may have "a spanking gallop of some miles daily along a firm and solitary beach" (*BLJ* 6, 9–11). In his poetry one can notice merging of the riding and swimming imagery; indeed Game illustrates her point with a quotation from *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* Canto 3: "The waves bound beneath me as a steed that knows his rider." The quoted passage comes from the lines on the poet leaving England in 1816, and though the speaker enthusiastically embraces the rhythm of sailing /swimming /riding and yields to the movement and "guidance" of the waves, a few lines later he expresses a sense of vulnerability. The image

of the rider is replaced by that of "a weed" completely helpless and subject to the power of the elements:

> And the waves bound beneath me as a steed
> That knows his rider. Welcome, to their roar!
> Swift be their guidance, wheresoe'er it lead!
> Though the strain'd mast should quiver as a reed,
> And the rent canvas fluttering strew the gale,
> Still must I on; for I am as a weed,
> Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam, to sail
> Where'er the surge may sweep, or tempest's breath prevail.
> (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III, stanza 2.11–18)

The swimmer feels safe and comfortable riding the waves, and at the beginning is actually willing to trust their "guidance" like a rider who is in perfect harmony with his horse, and knows he can completely trust it. Matthew Bevis suggests that lines 11–13 coalescing the imagery of "mastery" of horsemanship and "passivity" of yielding to the power of the waves reveal the poet's "fluid" attitude to life (2013, 60). Yet later in the same stanza Harold seems to be overwhelmed by the lack of control, and laments his fate as the image of the rider is replaced by that of a weed, torn from a rock and tossed aimlessly by the ocean. One may notice some correspondence between the imagery of this stanza and the playful image of the Romantic Pegasus riding from the letter to Moore. Byron's poetic instincts lead to his celebration of the bond between human and nature; the sailor/swimmer/rider is also a poet who feels he can trust his poetic instincts, yet this confidence is undercut by the fear of losing control. The ocean is all powerful; Pegasus throws Bellerophon off his back. The poet feels attracted to Romantic poetic freedom but is doubtful if he can show the true "mettle" of his winged horse without controlling its course.

However, in the final stanzas of Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Byron memorably eagerly embraces the power of the sea:

> [[cyt.]]And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
> Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
> Borne, like thy bubbles, onward: from a boy
> I wantoned with thy breakers – they to me
> Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
> Made them a terror – 'twas a pleasing fear,
> For I was as it were a child of thee,
> And trusted to thy billows far and near,
> And laid my hand upon thy mane – as I do here.
> (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV, stanza184, 1648–1656)

The pun on the word "mane/main" in the final line suddenly reveals the image of swimming as riding. As Pegasus is sometimes presented as a child of Poseidon and Medusa, this riding may be perceived as poetic composition. In contrast to the fear of being tossed as a weed at the beginning of Canto III, the speaker now trusts the movement of the waves, the rider trusts the winged horse and is no longer worried about checking his course. Instead the relationship is more a tender caress – reminding one of the old Mazeppa's bond with his horse. Byron seems at least

for a moment to trust his poetic instincts, which pull him in the direction of the poetic freedom of *Don Juan*.

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