

Prospectuses, Specimens and National Works:

Byron and John Hookham Frere

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Abstract

This article analyses Byron's stylistic conversion of 1817 by examining the transformative impact of John Hookham Frere's *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work, by William and Robert Whistlecraft*, which Byron acknowledged as his 'immediate model' for *Beppo*. Previous studies of this textual relationship have centred on *ottava rima* and emphasised the underlying influence of Italian burlesque poetry. I highlight other aspects of Frere's poem, showing how its title page parodies publishers' marketing devices and how it mixes mock-epic romance with wide-ranging satire of the British book trade. Frere's narratorial persona 'Whistlecraft', a chatty, self-mocking author who reflects playfully on the act of writing and the practicalities of publishing and printing, is part of the satire. Using similar techniques and motifs, Byron takes Frere's satiric method to a new level of imaginative accomplishment, creating a comic poetry that is both national and international in scope, first in his 'Venetian story' *Beppo* and later in *Don Juan*.

Byron's stylistic conversion of 1817 – the transformation of tone and technique that produced *Beppo* (1818) and later *Don Juan* (1819–24) – has been attributed to his discovery of the comic possibilities of *ottava rima*.¹ Disagreements remain, however, as to whether native Italian sources or English adaptations of *ottava rima* poetry proved decisive in opening up this rich new seam in his work.² Byron's own comments on this matter are somewhat contradictory, which is unsurprising since authors frequently say different things to different people on the subject of who or what has influenced their writing. He was fully aware, however, that his poetry had changed, even if he continued sometimes to write in his 'old' style; and the idea of stylistic or generic conversion – turning 'what once was romantic to burlesque' (*Don Juan*, IV, 3)³ – became a recurrent motif in his poetry. His critical opinions, too, had altered, and his subsequent reappraisal of the English literary scene, and his place within (or outside) it, was clearly shaped in part by the stylistic experiment he began in Venice in 1817. Since this new poetic was responsible for some of his greatest poetry and most penetrating criticism, the question of how it originated remains a compelling one.

In this article I will focus on a single line of influence, examining the impact of an English text that Byron acknowledged as his 'immediate model' for *Beppo* and whose imaginative

presence can still be felt in *Don Juan*.⁴ Its author was John Hookham Frere, a friend of Byron since 1813 and a member of the John Murray circle,⁵ others of whom played a part in this conversion story by bringing to Venice the new, strangely titled poem that struck Byron so forcibly: *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work, by William and Robert Whistlecraft, of Stow-Market, in Suffolk, Harness and Collar-Makers. Intended to Comprise the Most Interesting Particulars Relating to King Arthur and his Round Table*. I give the title in full because, although other critics have discussed the influence of Frere's poem,⁶ none has explored the implications of its title, which holds clues, I believe, as to some of the satirical techniques and motifs that captivated Byron and contributed to the innovations of *Beppo* and *Don Juan*.

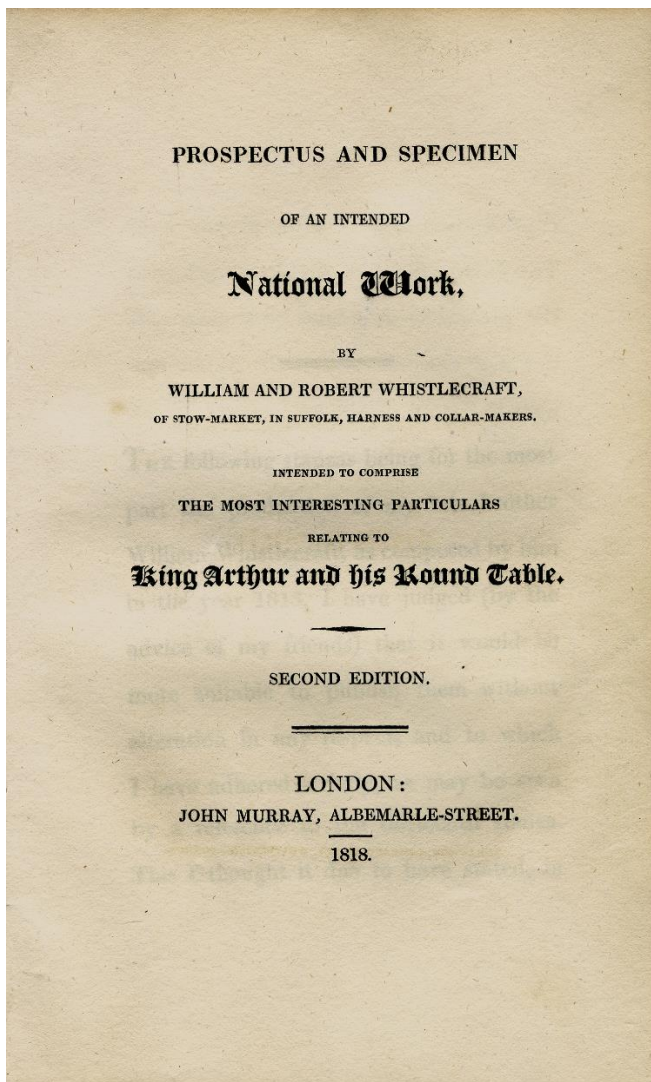


Figure 1 [John Hookham Frere], *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work*, 2nd edn (London: John Murray, 1818), title page. Private collection.

Published by Murray in two cantos in 1817 and extended to four cantos a year later (with a new title added in 1821),⁷ Frere's poem was modelled in part on the mock-epic romances of the Italian Renaissance, whose comic treatment of chivalric subject matter established a satirical tradition that was still active centuries later. In a letter to his friend Ugo Foscolo, an expert on this tradition, Frere identified a specific source of inspiration in extracts from Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore* (1483) which he had encountered in a French literary history of Italy.⁸ Byron, too, in his partial translation of the *Morgante* published in *The Liberal* (1823), recognised Pulci as the ultimate source of both the Italian tradition of chivalric satire and the 'new style of poetry very lately sprung up in England', of which Frere's poem was the prototype.⁹ Frere's title, however, alerts us to other aspects of his poem that have less to do with the Italian literary revival than with the contemporary English book trade, in particular the highly developed advertising practices employed by publishers like Murray. In the pages that follow, I will use an analysis of Frere's title page as a springboard for a wider discussion of his satirical techniques, before turning to *Beppo* and, very briefly, *Don Juan*.

I

A first clue is the opening words of Frere's title, 'Prospectus and Specimen'. Though the term now has other meanings, a 'prospectus' in its original sense was a form of printed advertisement announcing a proposed book, book series, journal or other publishing project. Associated particularly with subscription publishing, where the raising of capital through advance sales or orders would enable publication to go ahead, prospectuses were a widely used marketing device in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century book trade, used especially for expensive, illustrated books such as encyclopaedias, premium editions or topographical works, or for privately printed books sold by subscription.¹⁰ Unlike other types of advertisement, prospectuses were free-standing pamphlets, sent to prospective purchasers, left in bookshops or coffee shops or stitched into journals such as the *Quarterly Review*. A prospectus could be one, two, four, or more pages long, and typically it would state both the aims and intentions of the book – its rationale for publication – and its 'conditions of sale', specifying format, paper quality, method of delivery and price. Often the prospectus would be printed in the same format and typeface as the work it was advertising, to provide a physical sample as well as an intellectual description of it. More elaborate prospectuses might also contain one or more specimen pages, the words 'prospectus' and 'specimen' sometimes appearing together in the title, as in John Charnock's 'Prospectus and Specimen of an History

of Marine Architecture’, a proposal for a three-volume work in royal quarto ‘Drawn from the Best Authorities’ and ‘Illustrated by Upwards of One Hundred Plates ... Accurately Engraved by the Most Eminent Artists’, advertised in 1796;¹¹ or Josiah Conder’s ‘Prospectus and Specimen of The Modern Traveller’, a 12-page pamphlet issued in 1826 to advertise a popular illustrated gazetteer being sold in monthly parts by the London publisher James Duncan (the series had already begun publication, so the ‘specimen’ section in this case consisted of extracts from favourable reviews, with a decorative title page to suggest the quality of the art work).¹²

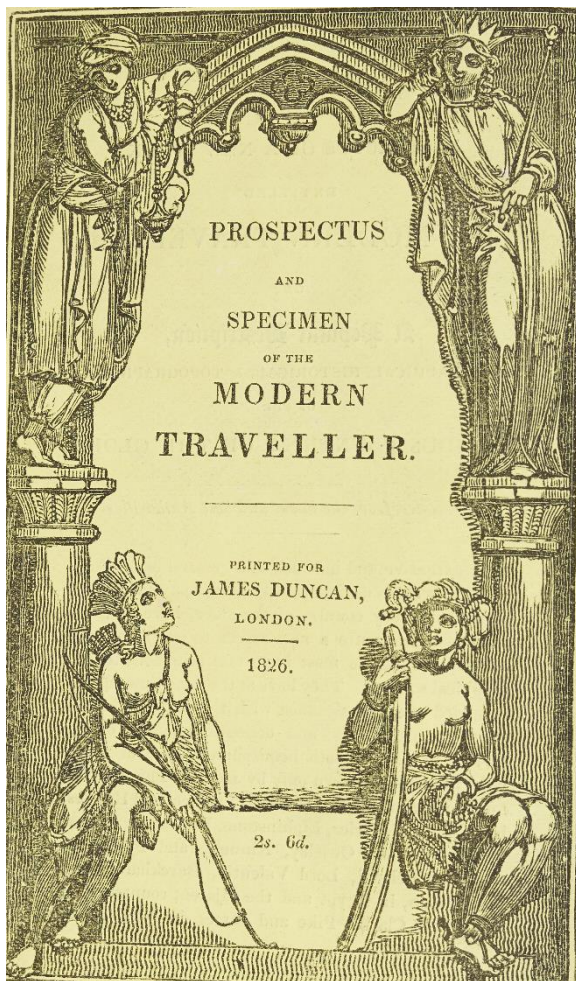


Figure 2 ‘Prospectus and Specimen of The Modern Traveller’. Title page of a 12-page advertisement issued in 1826 by London publisher James Duncan. Image © Special Collections, Magdalen College, Oxford.

Whether accompanied by specimen pages or not, a prospectus was an address to the public whose purpose was to describe a projected publication in as attractive a way as possible, and to set terms that would persuade people to subscribe to it. Written by the author

or publisher (or sometimes both), a prospectus would use every available means to achieve its object, deploying a poetics of enticement and anticipation that involved seductive (often highly inflated) language, carefully placed promises and highlighted selling points. Frere's *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work* mimics comprehensively and wittily this once recognisable but now forgotten genre. The poem has usually been read as a mock-epic romance in the Italian tradition of Pulci and Berni, but it is also a mock-advertisement that parodies this marketing device of the British book trade. Frere's title invokes the Knights of the Round Table – a fashionable topic once again, thanks to the chivalric revival led by Walter Scott and others – but it promises not a full-blown Arthurian romance but only 'the Most Interesting Particulars' thereof, a cherry-picking approach that takes to heart Francis Jeffrey's observation (in a review of Byron's fragmentary tale *The Giaour*) that a modern reader 'would now no more think of sitting down to a whole Epic, than to a whole ox'.¹³ The logic here, though, is not that of the fragment but that of the specimen or sample, where the part stands for the whole, and more is available if the consumer wants it. 'Interesting particulars' implies a buyer's rather than a reader's eye: in one of its meanings, 'particulars' is a term associated with sales brochures and contracts, while 'interesting' is a simply a publishers' cliché.¹⁴ The addition of the qualifier 'most' tips Frere's phrasing over into parody.

The word 'National' parodies another piece of advertising jargon. The adjective was used routinely by publishers to aggrandise their wares, as in John and Josiah Boydell's announcements of their 'National Editions' of Shakespeare and Milton, two of the grandest publishing projects of the 1790s;¹⁵ or the advertisement from 1805 for 'An Important and National Work' by David Steel on 'The Elements and Practice of Naval Architecture'. For the Boydells, the branding of the editions lays claim to the cultural capital of the two 'National Poets' (as they were frequently termed),¹⁶ while for Steel the word national signals both the scope and authority of his book and the link between its subject matter (ship-building) and Britain's military destiny, a major selling point in the year of Trafalgar. Frere's phrase 'National Work' copies this manoeuvre but his exaggerated emphasis on intention ('Intended National Work ... Intended to Comprise') promptly undermines the claim, drawing attention to the provisional, promissory quality of prospectuses and implying that their good intentions and hyperbolic language are not to be relied upon.

Frere's double pseudonym, 'William and Robert Whistlecraft, of Stowmarket, in Suffolk, Harness and Collar-Makers', adds further layers of parody. Whistlecraft is a real, if obscure, Suffolk name, but Frere's mention of the authors' lowly occupation converts it to satire, as this is plainly not the class of author we would expect for a chivalric romance, a genre

associated with the leisured gentry rather than working people, and with knights on horseback rather than those who make the horse's equipment. Nor is the provincial location, Stowmarket, a small town in East Anglia, what we would expect from a supposedly 'National' work. The contradictions are palpable, but the foregrounding of the authors' humble provenance parodies another familiar publishing device: the marketing of labouring-class poets in publications such as *Poems, on Several Occasions. By Ann Yearsley, A Milkwoman of Bristol* (1785), *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery. By John Clare, A Northamptonshire Peasant* (1820) or – the much-reprinted collection that instigated this publishing trend – *Poems on Several Subjects: Written by Stephen Duck, Lately a Poor Thresher in a Barn in the County of Wilts* (1730).¹⁷ Harness-making was a somewhat more prestigious occupation, but Frere's pseudo marketing tactic is similar, and the fact that there are two Whistlecrafts – the main author, William, now deceased, and his brother and executor Robert –¹⁸ plays into yet another publishing trend, for collaboratively authored satire, exemplified by James and Horace Smith's bestselling collection of parodies, *Rejected Addresses; or, The New Theatrum Poetarum* (1812).

That Frere's title page was deeply and multiply parodic should not come as a surprise from an author who made his literary reputation as a contributor to *The Anti-Jacobin* (1797–98), collaborating with George Canning on some of its best-known parodies, including 'The Loves of the Triangles' (based on Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*), and 'The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-Grinder' (a parody of Robert Southey's humanitarian verses). In 1800, Frere and Canning had even co-written a mock-prospectus, parodying the widely circulated *Prospectus of the Royal Institution* (1800),¹⁹ the first and most prestigious of the lecturing institutions that were a feature of early nineteenth-century London and other cities. Though unpublished, it showed his satirist's gift for making fun of grandiose ambitions and the inflated language used to promote them (one of its devices, the parodic catalogue, carries over directly into the Whistlecraft poem, and then into *Beppo*). The prospectus, as a genre, was particularly ripe for such parody, and there were several other mock-prospectuses in the period, including the anonymous 'Specimen of a Prospectus, or The Art of Swindling' published in *The Satirist* in 1808. Signed 'Retrospect' of 'Prospectus Row' (a parody of Paternoster Row), this six-page article uses heavy irony to debunk the pretensions of 'illustrious literary adventurers' and the fraudulent marketing methods employed by their publishers ('the tricking book-vamper, who, by a catching title affixed to some stale trash, swindles [people] out of their money').²⁰ To counter, or perhaps to celebrate, these dubious practices, the author of the article presents a mock-proposal for a 'new and splendid Work, to

be entitled, THE ART OF SWINDLING’, appending parodic ‘Conditions’ of sale and commending it to prospective purchasers (in another example of the cliché) as ‘a work which may be truly termed NATIONAL’.²¹

Frere’s *Prospectus and Specimen* is, on one level, an extended exercise in the same kind of satire. Following the parodic title page is a short prose preface in which Frere elaborates the fiction of the Whistlecraft brothers, explaining that this a belated printing of a poem written in 1813, which is offered for sale with a promise of more to come ‘if an indulgent public should espouse it’ (*PS*, p. vii). The same conceit – one Byron will pick up and develop – recurs at several points in the poem, notably the end of the second canto, where a worldly ‘Muse’ reassures the nervous author, who is worried about ‘Reviews, and paragraphs in morning papers’, that what matters is not critical opinion but sales figures:

‘My dear’, says she, ‘I think it will be well
To ascertain our losses or our gains:
If this first sample should succeed and sell,
We can renew the same melodious strains.’
(*PS*, II, 60)

The true addressee of these lines is not the author but the reader, who is invited to approve the ‘first sample’ by purchasing another instalment. A year later, readers had a chance to do just this with the publication of an expanded edition of the *Prospectus and Specimen*. The new cantos begin exactly where the old ones left off, weaving into the fictional scenario of the author and his muse a commission for a sequel from Frere’s real-life publisher: ‘I’ve a proposal here from Mr. Murray, / He offers handsomely – the money down’ (*PS*, III, 1). The closing lines of the poem echo this conceit again, referring to the agreed deadline for his ‘copy’: ‘I promis’d Murray t’other day, / To let him have it by the tenth of May’ (*PS*, IV, 56).

Elsewhere, Frere elaborates the persona of the jobbing author, writing poetry at his publisher’s behest. His choice of subject, he tells us at the start of Canto I, is dictated by the modern fashion for ‘old’ romance, a lucrative publishing trend his publisher is keen to exploit: ‘Beginning (as my Bookseller desires) / Like an old Minstrel with his gown and beard’ (*PS*, I, 1). Later he reveals how he is governed too by his source material: however violent the story, ‘I must transcribe / An ancient monkish record, which displays / The savage acts of that gigantic tribe’ (*PS*, III, 21). By doing so,

I hope, that from the diction of those days,
This noble, national poem will imbibe

A something (in the old reviewing phrase),
‘Of an original flavour, and a raciness;’
I should not else transcribe it out of laziness.
(*PS*, II, 21)

The pairing of ‘raciness’ and ‘laziness’ is the kind of comic rhyme in which Pulci-esque *ottava rima* specialises, and it is significant that it involves here, as often with Byron, the juxtaposition of a cant word with an everyday word, the effect being to undercut the pretensions of, in this case, cliché-ridden reviewing jargon. The adjectives ‘noble’ and ‘national’ are similarly compromised, Frere’s parodic style making clear that these supposed qualities of his poem are in fact little more than a contrivance to satisfy commercial expectations.

He brings the same mock-pragmatic spirit to his description of the task before him in the 11-stanza ‘proem’ that opens the *Prospectus and Specimen*, before the narrative proper. This is less an epic invocation or argument, as the term proem might imply, than a versified chat about the mundane realities of the publishing business, complete with a mini-history of the price of dedications (‘twenty guineas’ in the age of patronage, but ten-a-penny in the modern literary marketplace) and a run-down of the different social classes of reader he seeks for his work (*PS*, Proem, 4–6). The idea of literature as a commodity is reworked in ever more inventive ways, the zaniest of all being his mock-proposal to create two government boards to oversee the literary ‘export trade in whims and oddities’, ‘one Board for Verse and one for Prose’ (*PS*, Proem, 2). The idea is soon dropped but the play-off between verse and prose is one of many motifs that Byron will pick up on in *Beppo*.

Frere is similarly candid about his personal literary transactions, referring by name to successful competitors and precursors while signalling his own ambitions and motivations, which, in keeping with his persona, are as much commercial as artistic. He cites Southey’s *Madoc* and Scott’s *Marmion* as examples of fashionable verse narratives which are ‘out in print’ and selling well, and explains that, to cash in on this trend, he himself will turn to Arthurian legend. This presents him with the problem of breathing new life into stale and over-worked themes that currently languish in neglect, ‘like old portraits lumbering in the dark’ (*PS*, Proem, 10). His solution is to perform a vigorous act of spring-cleaning: ‘I’ll air them all, and rub down the Round Table, / And wash the Canvas clean, and scour the Frames, / And put a coat of varnish on the Fable’ (*PS*, Proem, 11). What is striking here is less his sense of the artistic challenge of reviving an archaic and exhausted genre (this was a common

trope in Romantic literature, as in earlier literary revivals) than the chatty openness and the homely metaphor with which he expresses it.

This easy-going, extempore approach to the task of writing is captured, too, in the metaphor of the ‘poetic cruize’ which Frere introduces in the first stanza and elaborates elsewhere. ‘I’ve often wish’d’, he says, ‘that I could write a book, / Such as all English people might peruse’. To produce it, ‘I’d sling a cot up for my favourite Muse’ and ‘sail about the world like Captain Cook’ (*PS*, Proem, 1). Travelling being better than arriving, the essence of this exploratory mode of writing is mobility: ‘We must take care in our poetic cruize, / And never hold a single tack too long’ (*PS*, I, 9). No sooner, then, has one thing been described than he veers off in another direction, accompanied by ‘my versatile ingenious Muse’ (I, 9). The right to digress is part and parcel of this poetics of versatility, and if one of its inspirations is Italian poetry, Frere adds an English inflection by invoking a native tradition of planless, freedom-loving writing:

Bold Britons take a Tankard, or a Bottle,
And when the bottle’s out, a pinch of snuff,
And so proceed in spite of Aristotle –
Those Rues of his are dry, dogmatic stuff,
All life and fire they suffocate and throttle –
(*PS*, II, 2)

Byron will make a similar manoeuvre in *Don Juan*, ostentatiously rejecting Aristotelian rules in favour of a more modern, open-ended conception of epic in which digression – and disdain for continental rules – play a central part, and even using the same irreverent rhyme, ‘Aristotle’ / ‘Bottle’ (*Don Juan*, I, 204).

Deferral – the anticipation of more and better things to come – is another explicit and recurrent motif in Frere’s poem, one that draws directly on the temporality of the publishing trade, which moves relentlessly forward from new book to new book, edition to edition: a self-renewing world of announcements in which each new product is claimed to be better and more indispensable than the last. A good example is when, midway through one of the action sequences, the narrator, struggling to find the right words to describe a particular land formation, breaks off to tell the reader:

A Copper-plate would make my meaning known
Better than words, and therefore, with permission,
I’ll give a Print of it in the next Edition.
(*PS*, II, 33)

Frere never fulfilled this promise, of course, since the second edition of the *Prospectus and Specimen*, like the first, did not carry illustrations. But the prospect of an improved, illustrated edition accords perfectly with the imaginative premise of the poem, and the casual mention of it here brings the reader vividly into the scene of writing and publishing which is the true terrain on which the ‘action’ takes place. The phrase ‘with permission’ is another piece of authenticating shoptalk: not just a courtesy to the reader but a reminder that an artist’s ‘permission’ will be needed for the reproduction of a copperplate engraving.

The supposed benefit of a clarificatory illustration is, however, nothing more than a convenient fiction, because elsewhere Frere defends the superiority of verbal over visual art, claiming, only half-facetiously, that ‘aquatint and etching / Will scarce keep pace with true poetic sketching’ (*PS*, III, 55), since pictures are a static art, while poetry is a mobile one:

The power of motion is the poet’s forte –
Therefore, again, ‘keep moving! that’s your sort!’
(*PS*, III, 56).

‘Keep moving’: no phrase better sums up the ad hoc, improvisatory, digressive quality that marks both the manner of story-telling and the author’s self-fashioning, as is revealed by the many occasions when Frere interrupts the narrative to reflect on his own writing process – or anything else that springs to mind.

The portrayal of Sir Tristram brings out another facet of this self-fashioning. Frere’s version of this legendary Arthurian knight bears little resemblance to previous portrayals but has definite points in common with Frere himself: enough to identify Sir Tristram, along with the narrator, as another of the poet’s self-portraits, a fantasy version of himself relocated to another time and place. Gifted, like Frere, with a love of languages and music but also an instinct for self-mockery,

Sir Tristram was prepar’d to sing and play,
Not like a minstrel earnest at his task,
But with a sportive, careless, easy style,
As if he seem’d to mock himself the while.
(*PS*, I, 18)

Like the poetic ‘cruizer’ who narrates the poem, ‘From realm to realm he ran – and never staid’: ‘It seem’d as if his labours were repaid / By the mere noise and movement of the fray’ (*PS*, I, 20).

Again like Frere (and this is a more surprising piece of self-portraiture, by an ex-diplomat who had ruined his reputation by some poor advice given when stationed in Spain during the Peninsular War), Sir Tristram's military decision-making was capricious and risky:

His schemes of war were sudden, unforeseen,
Inexplicable both to friend and foe;
It seem'd as if some momentary spleen
Inspir'd the project and impell'd the blow;
And most his fortune and success were seen
With means the most inadequate and low;
Most master of himself, and least encumber'd
When overmatch'd, entangled, and outnumber'd.
(*PS*, I, 21)

This remarkable piece of characterisation creates an amusing contrast with the diametrically opposed Sir Gawain, 'a perfect loyal Cavalier', who, with his 'courteous manners' and 'Unalterably fixed' discipline, was 'deem'd the very touchstone and the test / Of what was proper, graceful, just, and fit' (*PS*, II, 23–27). For all Gawain's qualities, it is clear that the narrator's sympathies lie with Tristram, whose main function in the poem seems to be to reinforce the aesthetic values of the writing itself. Tristram's 'sportive, careless, easy style' is that of the poet Frere, who fused the parodistic techniques of Pulci with the satirical devices of a mock-prospectus to create a perfect vehicle for his own versatile, not to say eccentric, creative personality.

Book-trade satire has a long history in English – and no author had done more with it than Alexander Pope, a century earlier, in *The Dunciad* (1728–1743) – but the advances of the book trade and the progress of advertising had created new possibilities for such satire. Though Frere's *Prospectus and Specimen* is ultimately part of the Popean tradition, its tone is more playful, its style more colloquial and its humour more gentle. Some contemporary readers of Frere's satire were puzzled by the lack of an ostensible target, but in many ways this is what makes the poem modern. Frere offers us a form of imaginative play in which self-referentiality – writing about writing (and publishing about publishing) – becomes an end in itself, and in which a highly mobile form of 'poetic cruising' and 'poetic sketching' replaces the set pieces and polished surfaces of traditional Augustan satire.

Although admired by Byron and other members of the Murray circle, Frere's poem was not a commercial success, and the fact that it went to four editions by 1821 (the fourth under the new title *The Monks and the Giants*) is not an indication of great public demand but rather of the canny marketing practices that are part of its subject: these included the issuing of new editions before the old ones were sold out in order to create a sense of sales momentum, and retitling to give the appearance of novelty (often simply the replacement of a title page on existing unsold stock).²² Despite agreeing to the publication of a sequel, Murray was of the view that the poem had not sold well because the public 'can not see the drift of it',²³ a view shared by Robert Southey, who remarked that it was 'too good in itself and too inoffensive to become popular; for it attacked nothing and nobody'.²⁴

Frere himself, though, put the poor sales down to Murray's failure to advertise it properly or to get it reviewed.²⁵ In a letter to Murray in April 1818, he confesses to being 'mortified at seeing no notice of "Whistlecraft" in the last issue of the *Quarterly*'.²⁶ 'With respect to advertising', he goes on:

The advertisements that I see are nothing to the purpose. 'Whistlecraft, a National Poem' is nothing; but 'Metrical Prospectus and Specimen' gives an intimation of the possibility of good nonsense in the work.

There is, of course, a deep irony in the suggestion that a poem that is itself a mock-advertisement should have failed because of poor advertising. Without quite making that connection, Frere insisted that the comic essence of his poem was indicated by its parodic title – and that Murray could therefore have been more ingenious in promoting it. To show him how, he sends Murray a spoof advertisement of his own, elaborating still further the idea of his poem as a marketable commodity:

'This article is confidently recommended to the public from its superior durability, being warranted not to wear out by the most repeated perusals.

First purchase "Whistlecraft", and then
Peruse and re-peruse again,
A dozen times at least, or ten;
The flights of his Stowmarket pen
Require a keen attentive ken,
Soaring above all other men,
As much as hawks surpass the wren.
Let Envy grumble from her Den,
While Pindus yields from Dupham Fen.

CONFUCIUS, Poet-in-Ordinary to Her Majesty's Lottery Officer
Keepers, Warren's Blacking, &c., &c.'

For Frere, the idea of a mock-advertisement to a mock-advertisement was clearly another piece of 'good nonsense', and the way he develops it here – in doggerel verse – is reminiscent of other satirical advertisements of the time, as is confirmed by the reference to 'Warren's Blacking', the famous shoe polish that was the subject of one of the period's most conspicuous and inventive advertising campaigns.²⁷ Satirical verse played a central role in that campaign, and in 1824 it would inspire a whole volume of parodies, much like the Smiths' *Rejected Addresses*, based on the premise that well-known poets such as Coleridge and Byron wrote the advertisements: William Frederick Deacon's *Warreniana*.

Frere, though, spoils his satirical premise by overworking it, adding another, confusing layer of pseudonymity by naming his advertiser-poet 'Confucius', thereby contradicting both the provincial connotations of 'Whistlecraft' and the national resonance of his Arthurian theme. However ingenious the analogy, the idea that his poem, like some household article, has 'durability' enough to withstand ten or twelve re-readings is also scarcely plausible: could any prospective buyer really have been won over by this suggestion? Murray clearly thought not, ignoring Frere's request. Frere, too, thought better of it, writing back to Murray asking him not to insert 'the buffoonish advertisement which I sent you'.²⁸

The *Prospectus and Specimen* itself, although not altogether free from clumsy buffoonery and from Frere's tendency to overwork his comic materials, is, for the most part a much more assured performance, and Frere was not wrong to think that despite selling only 700 copies (compared with nearly 6000 of *Beppo*), it 'was damned good', as he told Hobhouse.²⁹ That was certainly Byron's opinion, and in the remainder of this article I will discuss further some of the ways in which Byron put Frere's stylistic innovations and satirical motifs to his own creative use.

III

Previous accounts of the influence of Frere's *Prospectus and Specimen* on Byron have focussed on the figure of the chatty, digressive narrator and the comic use of *ottava rima*. As Elizabeth Boyd put it, 'the colloquial verse and gaiety' of Frere's poem 'set a new tune ringing in his head', and he proceeded almost immediately to the composition of *Beppo*, apparently completing it in just two days.³⁰ The fact that Byron read Frere's Italianate poem

on location in Italy, in the company of other members of the Murray set (the Kinnairds, Hobhouse, William Stewart Rose) whose witty banter and publishing shoptalk had helped to inspire it, doubtless amplified its impact. Other, unpublished poetry Byron wrote around this time confirms how thoroughly he was imaginatively immersed in the world of Albemarle Street – Murray’s headquarters in Mayfair – even as he savoured the cultural and carnal pleasures of Venice.³¹ This is important to recognise, as one of the major strengths of *Beppo* is the way it moves between observational comedy based on first-hand experience of Italian life, reworkings of themes from ancient and modern Italian poetry (a good example being the ‘Cavalier Servente’ passages, based directly on Casti’s *Novelle Galanti* (1804)) and contemporary British book-trade satire of the kind developed by Frere.³² The first and second of these elements have been well covered by previous critics, but the third strand has been treated only glancingly, and the role of Frere in facilitating this aspect of Byron’s work has been largely ignored.

A starting point is to recognise how fully Byron has assimilated Frere’s narrative persona of the genial, self-aware author reflecting on the writing, publishing and selling of his work. Unlike Frere, Byron did not use a pseudonym and his self-characterisation in *Beppo* as a ‘broken Dandy lately on my travels’ (*Beppo*, 52) is far removed from the provincial collar-maker who ostensibly narrates the *Prospectus and Specimen*. As we have seen, though, the narrative voice in Frere’s poem is in fact constantly changing (part of the mobility noted earlier): while some of the narration sounds like Whistlecraft (and his working man’s view of Arthurian chivalry and revelry generates part of the comedy), other sections sound much more like Frere himself, a genteel, Eton-educated wit at the heart of the London literary establishment. Though not quite a dandy, this takes him much closer to Byron’s persona, who is clearly modelled in part on this aspect of Frere’s poem (it is significant that *Beppo* was initially published anonymously, and some readers thought it was written by Frere).

The resemblances, on this level, are far-reaching. There is no explicit mention in *Beppo* of Murray (though Byron wrote other poetry addressed to him), but Byron, like Frere, takes us into the world of the practising poet, referring to tricks of the trade such as the use of dictionaries of rhyme, calculations about which genre is most likely to please a fashion-conscious public (a real-life conversation Byron had repeatedly with Murray) and concerns (or, in this case, a lack of them) about what critics think of his work. ‘I am but a nameless sort of person’, Byron writes, alluding jokily to the anonymity of *Beppo* (he added his name only to the fifth edition),

And take for rhyme, to hook my rambling verse on,
 The first that Walker's Lexicon unravels,
 And when I can't find that, I put a worse on,
 Not caring as I ought for critics' cavils;
 I've half a mind to tumble down to prose,
 But verse is more in fashion – so here goes!
 (Beppo, 52)

Passages like this both exemplify and describe the new style of writing Byron had learned from Frere. Its relaxed, spontaneous, self-deprecating narrative voice is a world away from that of the author-narrator in, say, the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, who also talks about the creative process, but in a much more high-toned and serious, not to say tormented, way. Frere's endlessly playful manner, including his imaginary banter with his 'versatile ingenious Muse' and his characterisation of the 'sportive, careless, easy style' of Sir Tristram, had showed Byron a new way of writing self-referential poetry and of interspersing acts of semi-serious storytelling with comic descriptions of the writing process.

As other critics have noted, the adoption of *ottava rima* played a central part in this stylistic transformation, since much of the verbal comedy in this stanza derives, as in Frere's poem, from the fusion of casual, idiomatic language ('I've half a mind to', 'tumble down', 'here goes!') with improbable, multiple rhymes ('person', 'verse on', 'worse one'). The flirtation with prose – a more typical medium for such throwaway, colloquial language – is another Frere theme, bringing the outrageous versecraft into even sharper relief.

But the debt to Frere extends beyond this. The self-reflexivity in Byron's poem, as in Frere's, relates not just to the act of writing and of storytelling, but also to book-making. It is a professional author's self-reflexivity, with one eye on the writing and the other eye on the sales figures, the next edition, the publicity, the reviews. In Byron's case, this involves deep layers of self-parody because he was not, like Frere, a relatively unknown writer but the most famous poet of the age. One of the most brazen displays of self-parody is when he looks back on his successful publications and converts them into an opportunistic wish-list, as if he were a fledgling poet rather than the publishing phenomenon he actually was:

Oh that I had the art of easy writing
 What should be easy reading! could I scale
 Parnassus, where the Muses sit inditing
 Those pretty poems never known to fail,
 How quickly would I print (the world delighting)
 A Grecian, Syrian, or Assyrian tale;
 And sell you, mix'd with western sentimentalism,
 Some samples of the finest Orientalism.
 (Beppo, 51)

'Easy writing' is described as a desideratum, but it is an 'art' that Byron already possesses, since these are unmistakable allusions to some of his actual poems, the so-called 'Turkish tales' or Eastern romances, irreverently described here as 'samples of the finest Orientalism'. Though accurate enough, such a description is pure prospectus-speak, and the attention-grabbing rhyme 'mix'd with western sentimentalism' underlines this, showing that Byron was well aware of the true nature of the literary confections of which he has provided such appealing specimens. For all the mention of Parnassus, the stanza is less about inspiration than it is about commercial calculation: this fashionable subject matter is 'never known to fail' with the 'delighting' public, and the stanza quickly moves from the writing to the printing and selling of poems.

Five stanzas earlier, the language of book-making surfaces again when Byron glosses his attempts to describe the beauties of Venetian women with a versified footnote assuring us that 'He speaks as a spectator, not officially, / And always, reader, in a modest way' (*Beppo*, note to stanza 46). The note is signed 'PRINTER'S DEVIL', as if an eager-eyed assistant in the print shop had spotted Byron's lines and thought they might be too salacious. But the claim to modesty is of course ironic, since Byron's descriptions of 'Italian beauty' is genuinely risqué, and his enumeration of its many female manifestations hints that he has done his research thoroughly. The fact that this is a poem of experience is one of its selling points, as are its descriptions of Italian everyday life, which make *Beppo* a piece of travel writing as well as a romance, foreign travel literature being yet another of the fashionable genres Byron has assimilated. This sets it apart from Frere's poem, which is authentically 'national' in its restriction to British subject matter, and Byron signals that difference in his subtitle, 'A Venetian Story'. *Beppo* is, though, a London story as much as a Venetian one, part of its appeal being Byron's sharply observed comparisons of English and Italian (and Turkish, another international dimension) ways of life, including his celebrated comparison between the Italian language, 'that soft bastard Latin, / Which melts like kisses from a female mouth' and the 'harsh northern whistling, grunting guttural' which is spoken English (*Beppo*, 44).

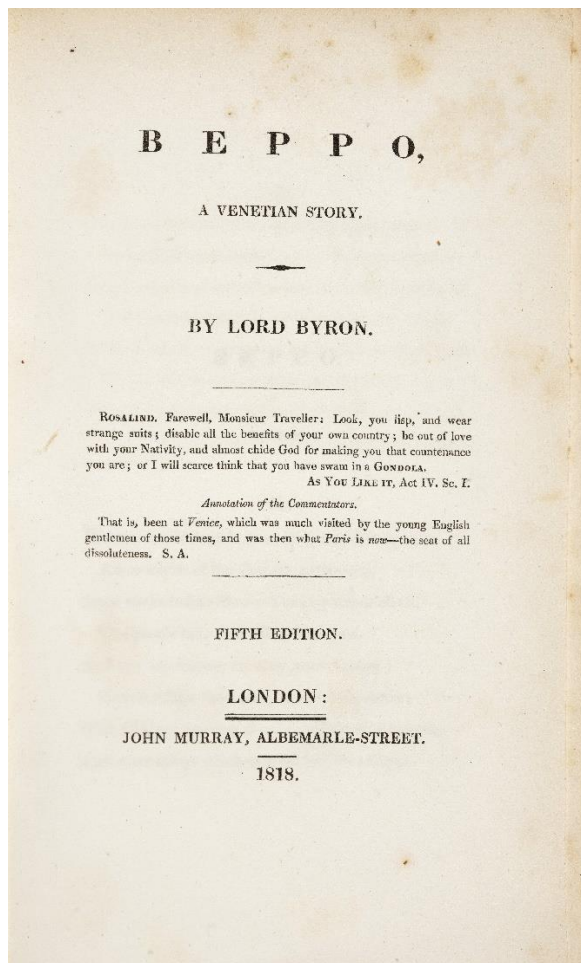


Figure 3 Lord Byron, *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, 5th edn (London: John Murray, 1818), title page. The first edition to carry the author's name. Private collection.

Tom Mole, in the best study to date of *Beppo* as a material text, notes how the poem 'imagines itself as voice, script, and print by turns, manifesting a sophisticated self-reflexive awareness of the processes of mediation involved in its writing and publication'.³³ What he does not say is that it took its cue in this respect, as in others, from Frere's *Prospectus and Specimen*. *Beppo* pushes Frere's self-reflexivity one step further, in the sense that it is a genuinely autobiographical poem as well as a poem about its own production, and the narratorial 'I' that constantly interrupts the storytelling gives us a version of Byron the writer and Byron the man that is closer to the unmasked self of his letters and journals than to the constructed personas that had narrated *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Turkish tales. The confessional element is, however, disguised by self-parody and by the blatant contradiction in Byron's self-portraiture whereby he both delights in his first-hand knowledge of the writing and publishing trade, giving us highly particularised descriptions of it, and simultaneously denies that he is anything so demeaning as a professional author.

On the one hand, then, Byron uses his bibliographic expertise to take us right down to details of paper quality and book design, such as the ‘silver paper’ that is interleaved between the frontispiece and title page of a new ladies’ magazine, ‘for fear the press / Should soil with parts of speech the parts of dress’ (*Beppo*, 57). Has any other author ever captured such a trivial but striking detail, and done so in such a well-constructed and cleverly rhymed stanza? On a purely technical level, this surpasses Frere, though the *Prospectus and Specimen* taught Byron that such effects were possible (it has many descriptions of paper types, bindings and book clasps). On the other hand, though, Byron professes scorn for writers who are too wedded to their trade, and too dependent on its for their source of income:

One hates an author that’s *all author*, fellows
In foolscap uniforms turned up with ink,
So very anxious, clever, fine, and jealous,
One don’t know what to say to them, or think,
Unless to puff them with a pair of bellows;
Of coxcombry’s worst coxcombs even the pink
Are preferable to these shreds of paper,
These unquenched snuffings of the midnight taper.
(*Beppo*, 75)

In Byron’s Gillrayesque satire, professional writers become themselves ‘shreds of paper’, their inky fingers a mark of their lowly, dependent status, and their clever banter undermined by their manifest anxiety about their critical reception, jealousy of competitors and desperate need for praise. Coming from a writer who made a huge amount of money from his publications and was himself the subject of a ‘puffing’ campaign almost as large as that of Warren’s *Blacking*,³⁴ this description of professional authorship is sheer bad faith, and the next stanza is even more disingenuous, sneering at the kind of smug literary coterie of which Byron himself was part (though he had other ones in mind). But he had the good fortune to be a member of the aristocracy with an inherited estate and private income as well as being a bestselling poet. This amplifies a contradiction already lurking in Frere, who was another gentleman author with inherited wealth, even if he poses as a harness-maker and delights in the grubby practicalities of publishing, printing and advertising.

Such contradictions, a much-discussed topic in Byron criticism,³⁵ are never resolved in *Beppo*, though the allusion to Pope’s *Dunciad* in the next stanza suggests he thought them a legitimate feature of book-trade satire, which frequently denounces the very thing it exemplifies. Compared with Frere’s *Prospectus and Specimen*, *Beppo* is indeed a much sharper satire, combining parody of publishing and advertising practices with thinly-veiled

attacks on individual writers. But personal satire is just one of many types of satire in *Beppo*, and the overall effect is very unlike that of Pope or of his earlier satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), which targets other aspects of the book trade and adopts a more acerbic, Juvenalian tone. Byron told Murray that *Beppo* ‘has politics & ferocity, & won’t do for your Isthmus of a Journal’ (not the *Quarterly* but another right-leaning literary journal which Murray planned but never realised).³⁶ Murray seems not to have seen it in quite this way, remarking only on its entertaining qualities and imaginative virtuosity, and publishing it – separately – at the earliest opportunity. Other members of the Murray circle were equally admiring and approving, the greatest compliment of all being paid by Frere, who initially thought *Beppo* was written by William Stewart Rose, but when he found out it was by Byron, said to Murray that it shows ‘the protean talent of Shakespeare’ in the author’s ability to transform himself into different characters.³⁷ No one, then or now, would make such a strong claim for Frere’s poem, but the ‘protean’ qualities of *Beppo* are, I have suggested, a raising to a higher pitch of the ‘versatile, ‘mobile’ poetics of the *Prospectus and Specimen*. In praising *Beppo* in these terms, Frere was returning the compliment of Byron’s having imitated him so effectively.

IV

As is well known, Frere did not think so highly of *Don Juan*, which he considered profligate, and he was one of the ‘cursed puritanical committee’ who advised Murray against publishing it, even claiming, later in life, that he discontinued writing burlesque *ottava rima* because of the stigma that was associated with it after the publication of *Don Juan*. Whatever the uses, though, to which Byron puts this new style of writing, the influence of Frere persists, not just in the handling of *ottava rima* but in many other devices introduced by the *Prospectus and Specimen*. Advertising, sampling, mock-dedications, addresses to the public, the conception of the reader-as-buyer, the defiance of generic rules, deferral and digression, the promise of more and better things to come: all these and other motifs which generate some of the most brilliant satire in *Don Juan* originate, in part at least, in Frere’s poem, awaiting the protean talent of Byron to take them to their fullest development. Analysis of that development, however, must be deferred to another occasion because, as Frere or Byron might say, I have exceeded my wordcount, my copy is overdue, and this article must go to press without further ado.

¹ This article originated in an invited paper for the Byron Society and was completed during my tenure of a Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust, for both of which I express thanks.

² For a careful evaluation of the arguments, see Will Bowers, *The Italian Idea: Anglo-Italian Radical Literary Culture, 1815-1823* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 101-10. See also Robert B. Ogle, 'A Byron Contradiction: Some Light on His Italian Study', *Studies in Romanticism*, 12.1 (1973), pp. 436-42; and, for the broader context, Alan Rawes and Diego Saglia (eds), *Byron and Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

³ All quotations from Byron's poetry are from *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93). Hereafter *CPW*.

⁴ Letter to John Murray of 25 March 1818, in Leslie A. Marchand (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973-94), VI, p. 25. Hereafter *BLJ*.

⁵ They dined together in July 1813 (*BLJ*, III, p. 80) and Frere's name thereafter appears frequently in Byron's letters and journals. Other accounts of their interactions can be found in Murray's correspondence and in contemporary sources quoted in Gabrielle Festing, *John Hookham Frere and His Friends* (London: Nisbet, 1899).

⁶ Previous studies include Albert Eichler, *John Hookham Frere: Sein Leben und Seine Werke, Sein Einfluss auf Lord Byron* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1905), pp. 170-84; William Keach, 'Political Inflection in Byron's "Ottava Rima"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 27.4 (1988), pp. 551-62; N.E. Gayle, 'Byron - and Frere - at the Octave', *Byron Journal*, 42.2 (2014), pp. 133-43; and Bowers, *The Italian Idea*, pp. 104-106.

⁷ The expanded second and third editions (both 1818) kept the original title; the fourth (1821) carried a new title, *The Monks and the Giants*, while retaining *Prospectus and Specimen*, etc., as a subtitle, together with the double pseudonym. The title was often abbreviated to 'Whistlecraft', referring either to the poem or poet; some readers believed this was the author's real name. All quotations below are from *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work*, ed. by Donald R. Reiman, facsimile, 2 vols in 1 (New York: Garland, 1978), which reproduces Cantos I and II from the first edition and Cantos III and IV from the second. Hereafter *PS*.

⁸ Frere, letter to Ugo Foscolo of 8 May 1818, cited by Bowers, *The Italian Idea*, p. 105.

⁹ 'Morgante Maggiore di Messer Luigi Pulci. Advertisement', *CPW*, IV, p. 247.

¹⁰ David Duff, 'The Book to Come: Literary Advertising and the Poetics of the Prospectus', in Louisiane Ferlier and Bénédicte Miyamoto (eds), *Forms, Formats and the Circulation of Knowledge: British Printscape's Innovations, 1688 -1832* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 229-52; Duff, 'Literary Sampling and the Poetics of the Specimen', *Studies in Romanticism*, 59.1 (2020), pp. 109-32.

¹¹ John Charnock, 'Prospectus and Specimen of an History of Marine Architecture' (London: R. Faulder, 1796), British Library, shelfmark T.927 (7).

¹² [Josiah Conder], 'Prospectus and Specimen of The Modern Traveller' (London: James Duncan, 1826), Oxford, Magdalen College Library, shelfmark w.4.57(2). A reprint of an 1825 advertisement.

¹³ *Edinburgh Review*, 42 (July 1813), p. 299.

¹⁴ For the inflated language of book advertising, see James Raven, *The Business of Book: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 282-87.

¹⁵ This wording appears in a one-page prospectus headed 'Milton', issued by Boydells and Nichols in 1792 and reprinted in 1797. It invites subscriptions to their *Poetical Works of Milton* and is addressed to subscribers to their earlier edition of Shakespeare, which was linked to the Shakespeare Gallery. Various versions of these advertising documents are held by the British Library.

¹⁶ For the currency of this term, see Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

¹⁷ For these and other examples, see William J. Christmas, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry, 1730-1830* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001).

¹⁸ There may also be a family in-joke here: Frere had three younger brothers, one of whom appears to have conducted some of his negotiations with Murray. For this and other helpful suggestions, I am grateful to David Woodhouse.

¹⁹ 'Prospectus for the Royal Institution, March 1900', in Josceline Bagot, *George Canning and His Friends: Containing Hitherto Unpublished Letters, Jeux D'esprit, etc.*, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1909), I, pp. 162-64. The anachronistic date is itself parodic, mocking the Institution's progressive ambitions.

²⁰ [Anon.], 'Specimen of a Prospectus; or The Art of Swindling', *The Satirist*, 2 (April 1808), pp. 132-37 (p. 132).

²¹ ‘The Art of Swindling’, pp. 134–35.

²² For such practices, see William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 181.

²³ Letter of 16 June 1818, *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 252. Hereafter *JM Letters*.

²⁴ Letter to Walter Savage Landor of 20 February 1820, in *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. by C. C. Southey, 6 vols (London: Longman, 1849–50), V, p. 21.

²⁵ There were in fact several reviews of the first or second edition, e.g. in the *British Critic* (October 1817), *Monthly Review* (April 1818), *British Review and London Critical Journal* (May 1818) and (postdating Frere’s letter to Murray) *Quarterly Review* (April 1819). The last is part of Ugo Foscolo’s long review article on ‘The Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians’.

²⁶ Frere, letter to Murray of 27 April 1818, in Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768-1843* (London: Murray, 1891), pp. 22–23.

²⁷ John Strachan, *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 117–62.

²⁸ Quoted in Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends*, p. 24.

²⁹ John Cam Hobhouse, unpublished diary entry of 30 December 1818, quoted in *JM Letters*, p. 255, n. 17. The figure of 700 is from Frere’s conversation with Hobhouse; the figure of c. 6000 for the eight editions of *Beppo* is from St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, Appendix 9, p. 588.

³⁰ Elizabeth French Boyd, *Byron’s Don Juan: A Critical Study* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), p. 10. For a detailed account of the composition, contexts and publication of *Beppo*, see Jerome J. McGann, ‘“Mixed Company”: Byron’s *Beppo* and the Italian Medley’, *Shelley and His Circle 1773-1822*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), VII, pp. 234–57.

³¹ See, for example, his verse letter of 8 January 1818 (*BLJ*, VI, pp. 3–5) and letter of 21 August 1817 sending Murray an imaginary rejection letter in verse to Polidori (*BLJ*, V, pp. 257–61). Both poems mention Frere.

³² Roberto Sangiorgi, ‘Giambattista Casti’s “Novelle Galanti” and Lord Byron’s “Beppo”’, *Italica*, 28.4 (1951), pp. 261–69; Peter Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 43–63.

³³ Tom Mole, ‘“My Pen is at the Bottom of a Page”’, in Drummond Bone (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 23–37 (p. 29).

³⁴ Nicholas Mason, *Literary Advertising and the Shaping of British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 50–80.

³⁵ Matthew Sangster, *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 27–28; see also Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Tom Mole, *Byron’s Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³⁶ Letter to Murray of 27 January 1818, *BLJ*, VI, p. 9.

³⁷ Quoted in Murray’s letter to Byron of 16 June 1818, *JM Letters*, p. 251.