

**SELECTIONS FROM
THE WORKS OF
LORD BYRON**

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Selections from the works of Lord Byron by George Gordon Byron & Algernon Chas. Swinburne

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GEORGE GORDON BYRON & ALGERNON CHAS. SWINBURNE

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MOXON'S MINIATURE POETS.

A
SELECTION FROM
THE WORKS
OF

LORD BYRON.

EDITED AND PREFACED BY ALGERNON CHAS. SWINBURNE.



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PREFACE.

THE most delicate and thoughtful of English critics has charged the present generation of Englishmen with forgetfulness of Byron. It is not a light charge : and it is not ungrounded. Men born when this century was getting into its forties were baptized into another church than his with the rites of another creed. Upon their ears, first after the cadences of older poets, fell the faultless and fervent melodies of Tennyson. To them, chief among the past heroes of the younger century, three men appeared as predominant in poetry ; Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. Behind these were effaced, on either hand, the two great opposing figures of Byron and Wordsworth. No man under twenty can just now be expected to appreciate these. The time was when all boys and girls who paddled in rhyme and dabbled in sentiment were wont to adore the presence or the memory of

Byron with foolish faces of praise. It is of little moment to him or to us that they have long since ceased to cackle and begun to hiss. They have become used to better verse and carefuller workmen ; and must be forgiven if after such training they cannot at once appreciate the splendid and imperishable excellence which covers all his offences and outweighs all his defects : the excellence of sincerity and strength. Without these no poet can live ; but few have ever had so much of them as Byron. His sincerity indeed is difficult to discover and define ; but it does in effect lie at the root of all his good works : deformed by pretension and defaced by assumption, masked by folly and veiled by affectation ; but perceptible after all, and priceless.

It is no part of my present office to rewrite the history of a life in which every date and event that could be given would now seem trite and stale to all possible readers. If, after so many promises and hints, something at once new and true shall at length be unearthed or extricated, which may affect for the better or the worse our judgment of the man, it will be possible and necessary to rewrite it. Meantime this among other chances "lies on the lap of the gods ;" and especially on the lap of a goddess who still treads our earth. Until she speaks, we cannot

guess what she may have to say ; and can only pass by with reverent or with sceptical reticence.

Thus much however we may safely assert : that no man's work was ever more influenced by his character ; and that no man's character was ever more influenced by his circumstances. Rather from things without than from things within him did the spirit of Byron assume colour and shape. His noblest verse leapt on a sudden into life after the heaviest evils had fallen upon him which even he ever underwent. From the beginning indeed he had much to fight against : and three impediments hung about him at starting, the least of which would have weighed down a less strong man : youth, and genius, and an ancient name. In spite of all three he made his way ; and suffered for it. At the first chance given or taken, every obscure and obscene thing that lurks for pay or prey among the fouler shallows and thickets of literature flew against him ; every hound and every hireling lavished upon him the loathsome tribute of their abuse ; all nameless creatures that nibble and prowl, upon whom the serpent's curse has fallen, to go upon his belly and eat dust all the days of his life, assailed him with their foulest venom and their keenest fangs. And the promise given of old to their kind was now at least fulfilled ; they did bruise his

heel. But the heads of such creatures are so small that it is hard to bruise them in return ; it would first be necessary to discern them.

That Byron was able to disregard and to outlive the bark and the bite of such curs as these is small praise enough : the man who cannot do as much is destructible, and therefore contemptible. He did far more than this ; he withstood the weight of circumstances to the end ; not always without complaint, but always without misgiving. His glorious courage, his excellent contempt for things contemptible, and hatred of hateful men, are enough of themselves to embalm and endear his memory in the eyes of all who are worthy to pass judgment upon him. And these qualities gave much of their own value to verse not otherwise or not always praiseworthy. Even at its best, the serious poetry of Byron is often so rough and loose, so weak in the screws and joints which hold together the framework of verse, that it is not easy to praise it enough without seeming to condone or to extenuate such faults as should not be overlooked or forgiven. No poet is so badly represented by a book of selections. It must show something of his weakness ; it cannot show all of his strength. Often, after a noble overture, the last note struck is either dissonant or ineffectual. His magnificent