

# A Confabulation of Poets

**R**EVIEWING John Lauritsen's *Don Leon* is in essence reviewing a review, as the book is entirely concerned with the meaning and provenance of another author's work. Lauritsen thus provides two benefits in one package. We get the full text of these two peculiar and interesting poems and also the assembled end result of an exceptionally thorough detective story involving the work of several serious researchers over a period of a hundred years. "End result" may be the wrong term for an investigation that has only a misty closure, but we get what is currently known, laid out in a way that allows any reader, even one not steeped in Byronic lore, both to enjoy the poem and appreciate the work of Inspector Lauritsen and his fellow sleuths.

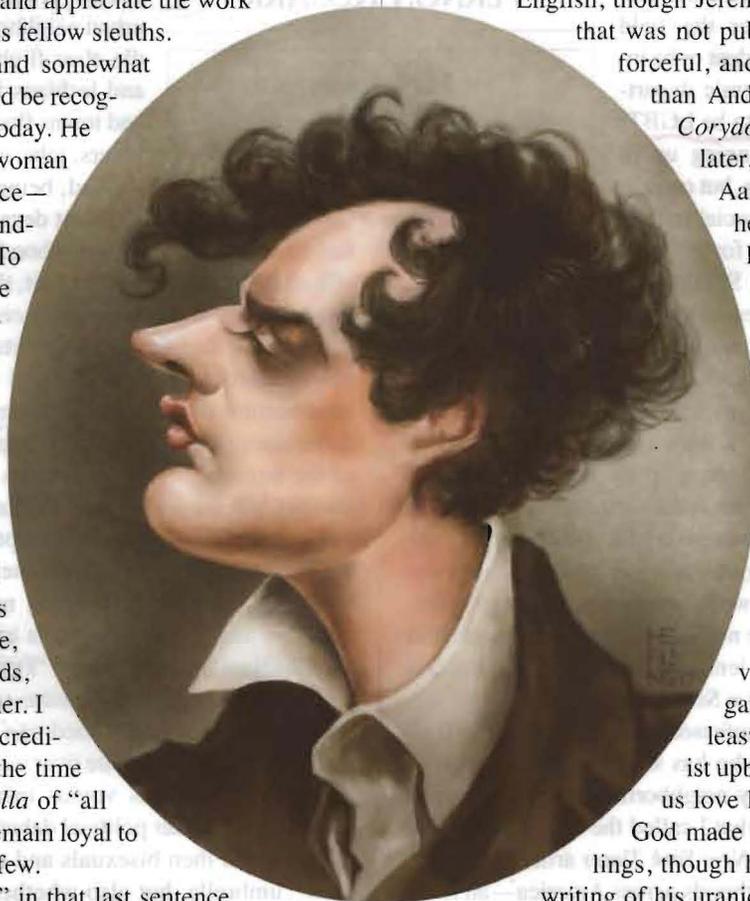
Byron had a complex and somewhat troubled sexual life that would be recognized as a bisexual variant today. He seems never to have met a woman he didn't instinctively seduce—not that they fled from the handsome and charming writer. To the contrary, one of his more significant female companions pursued him ever more strangely for years, sometimes dressed as a boy. As James Merrill put it upon seeing an opera in which the understudy soprano stepped in for the final act, she changed her hair, but it didn't save her marriage. Byron was ditched by his one actual wife, apparently on fidelity grounds, after a very short time together. I can't help but wonder what credibility he thought he had by the time he wrote in *Leon to Annabella* of "all those I scorned" in order to remain loyal to Annabella. He scorned very few.

But the words "he wrote" in that last sentence need to be explored. One of the main issues in this book is whether in fact Byron wrote any of this work at all. Lauritsen makes a plausible case that Byron probably did write the *Annabella* poem, though the story of its discovery in a peasant's hut once used by Byron reads like something from the annals of P.D.Q. Bach. *Annabella* has a masterful rippling cadence to it and is more readable and enjoyable as a poem than is *Don Leon*.

*Alan Contreras is a writer and higher education consultant who lives in Eugene, Oregon.*

ALAN CONTRERAS

**Don Leon and Leon to Annabella:  
Lord Byron**  
Edited by John Lauritsen  
Pagan Press. 185 pages, \$14.99



It feels more personal than *Don Leon* and has some pointed, powerful, and delicately snarky language that we might easily use today:

Between the sheets salacious lawyers pry,  
Yet nature varies not:—desires we feel,  
As Romans felt; but woe! if we reveal,  
For what were errors then, our happy times  
With sainted zeal have registered as crimes.

By comparison to *Annabella*, *Don Leon* is really a sort of political brief dressed as a poem. A rather bald statement of the need for social tolerance of homosexuality, *Don Leon* is far ahead of its time, the first such statement known to be issued in

English, though Jeremy Bentham wrote something that was not published. A much more direct, forceful, and in some ways cheerful ride than André Gide's austere, academic *Corydon* (1911) almost a century later, *Don Leon* feels more like Aaron Fricke saying in 1980 that he is damn well going to take his boyfriend to the prom, and society needs to get over it. Not only is the tone unusual for its subject and time period, but the brute clarity of the message is akin to the opening of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*: a writhing platter of radical new ideas simply heaved into the unprepared face of the prevailing social order.

In addition to his more obvious and traditional hetero sex games, Byron took seriously at least one part of his early Calvinist upbringing: "God made man—let us love him," though in Byron's case God made boy. He had a taste for Gidelings, though he quite sensibly approached writing of his uranic desires for teenage lads in a manner both oblique and coded, like the far more astringent and reserved A. E. Housman a century later [see essay on page 15]. Whether he personally wrote these words in *Don Leon* can be argued, but their meaning, and the meaning of similar passages, cannot:

Full well I knew, though decency forbad  
The same caresses to a rustic lad;  
Love, love it was, that made my eyes delight  
To have his person ever in my sight.

