

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage



Childe Harold's Pilgrimage is a lengthy narrative poem in four parts written by Lord Byron. It was published between 1812 and 1818 and is dedicated to "Ilanthe". The poem describes the travels and reflections of a world-weary young man who, disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry, looks for distraction in foreign lands. In a wider sense, it is an expression of the melancholy and disillusionment felt by a generation weary of the wars of the post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. The title comes from the term *childe*, a medieval title for a young man who was a candidate for knighthood.



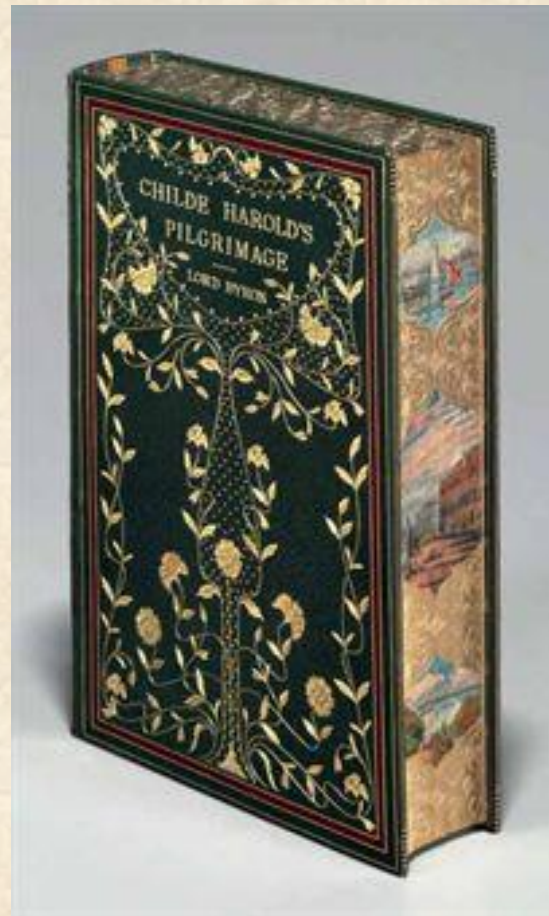
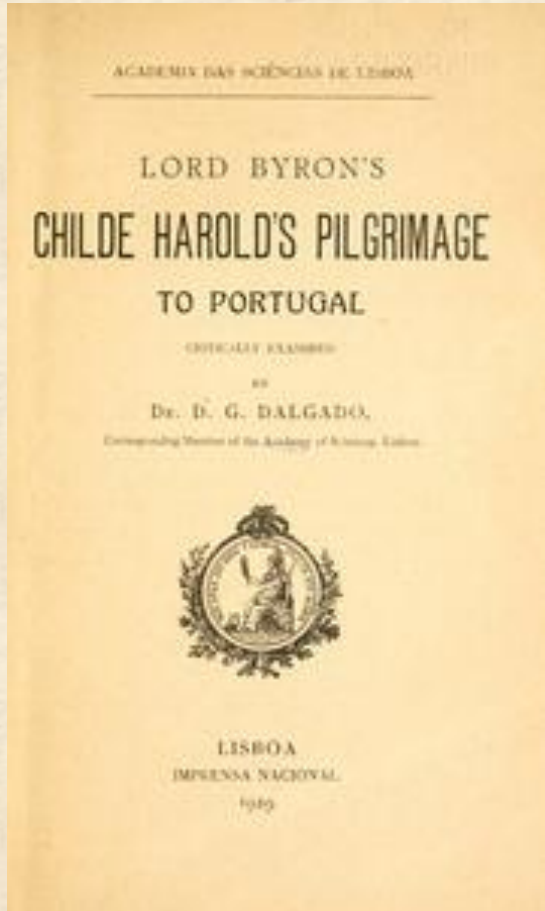
The poem contains elements thought to be autobiographical, as Byron generated some of the storyline from experience gained during his travels through Portugal, the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea between 1809 and 1811. The "lanthe" of the dedication was the term of endearment he used for Lady Charlotte Harley. Charlotte Bacon née Harley was the second daughter of 5th Earl of Oxford and Lady Oxford Jane Elizabeth Scott née Harley, about 11 years old when *Childe Harold* was first published.



Throughout the poem Byron, in character of Childe Harold, regretted his wasted early youth, hence re-evaluating his life choices and re-designing himself through going on the pilgrimage, during which he lamented on various historical events including the Iberian Peninsular War among others.



Despite Byron's initial hesitation at having the first two cantos of the poem published because he felt it revealed too much of himself, it was published, at the urging of friends, by John Murray in 1812, and brought both the poem and its author to immediate and unexpected public attention.



Byron later wrote, "I awoke one morning and found myself famous". The first two cantos in John Murray's edition were illustrated by Richard Westall, well-known painter and illustrator who was then commissioned to paint portraits of Byron.





The work provided the first example of the Byronic hero. The idea of the Byronic hero is one that consists of many different characteristics. The hero must have a rather high level of intelligence and perception as well as be able to easily adapt to new situations and use cunning to his own gain. It is clear from this description that this hero is well-educated and by extension is rather sophisticated in his style.

Aside from the obvious charm and attractiveness that this automatically creates, he struggles with his integrity, being prone to mood swings. Generally, the hero has a disrespect for certain figures of authority, thus creating the image of the Byronic hero as an exile or an outcast. The hero also has a tendency to be arrogant and cynical, indulging in self-destructive behaviour which leads to the need to seduce women. Although his sexual attraction through being mysterious is rather helpful, it often gets the hero into trouble. Characters with the qualities of the Byronic hero have appeared in novels, films and plays ever since.



Childe Harold came from an old aristocratic family. His ancestors were men of great courage and heroism. Harold's life was very different from theirs, it is full of pleasure and entertainment. But now he only felt a great weariness and discontent. He lost faith in friendship and was disappointed in the world of lies in which he found himself. Hoping to find Good in other countries he left England. Childe Harold is a sensitive, disillusioned and generous wanderer.

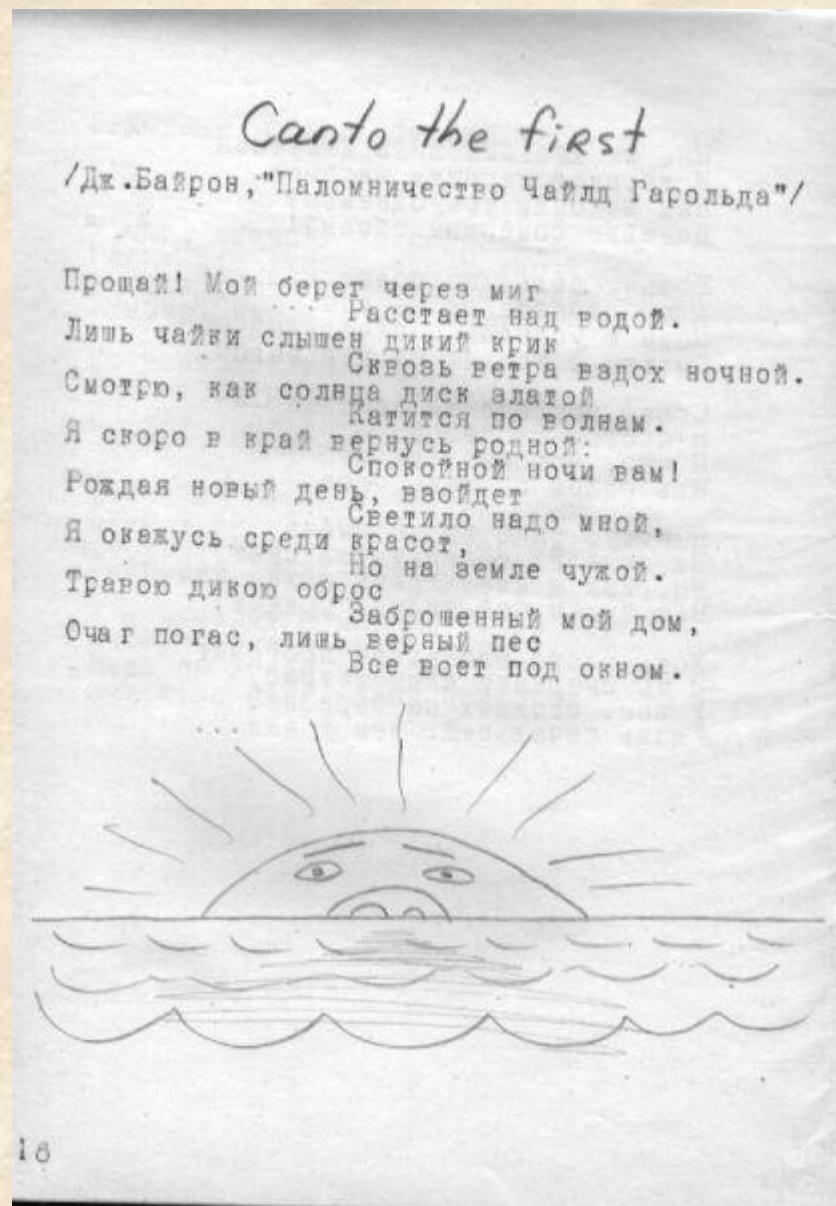




When the poem first appeared in print, many people believed that Byron's own character was presented in the person of Childe Harold, but he author denied it: he justly considered himself to be an active fighter for freedom, while Harold was merely a passive onlooker.

Childe Harold leaves his country for Portugal and Spain; when the ship is far from the shores of England, he sings Good Night to his Motherland.

Canto the First describes Portugal and Spain. Byron shows his surprise at the contrast between the splendour of the land, where "fruits of fragrance blush on every tree", and the poverty of the people. In the Spanish scenes the poet shows the people's struggle against Napoleon's invasion which the poet witnessed during the stay in Spain in 1809—1810. Byron sympathizes with those people fighting for their freedom and independence and blames the ruling classes who betray the interests of the country.



CHILDE HAROLD'S
PILGRIMAGE.

A ROMANT.

BY LORD BYRON.

A NEW EDITION, WITH ALL THE NOTES,

EDITED BY THOMAS MOORE.

PHILADELPHIA:
HENRY CAREY BAIRD,
(SUCCESSOR TO E. L. CAREY,)
No. 1 HART'S BUILDINGS, SIXTH STREET ABOVE CHESTNUT.
1856.



Canto the Second is devoted to Albania and Greece. Describing Harold's stay in Albania, Byron depicts his own adventures in the country. He admires the Albanians for their kindness, generosity and hospitality, and praises the great men of the past.

The motif of disappointment sounds with great force when Harold comes to Greece. The miserable state of the Greek people, who suffer under the yoke of the Turks arouses Byron's indignation and makes him recall the glorious past of Greece.





Canto the Third begins and ends with a touching address by Byron to his daughter Ada, whom he was never destined to see again. From personal sorrows Byron passes to the sufferings of the people that groan under the yoke of oppression. The greater part of canto describes the beautiful scenery of Switzerland. Pictures of nature — now calm and serene, now stormy as the feelings of the poet himself, *alternate* with philosophical reflections.



Canto the Fourth, dealing with Italy, is usually regarded as the finest. It describes people and events of ancient history. Byron regrets the fall of free states, their high culture and art. Byron calls Italy the “Mother of Art” and admires the Italian people who gave the world such men as Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and other titans of art, science and literature. A great part of Canto the Fourth is devoted to the theme of genius and immortality. Byron puts forth the idea that true glory is achieved through creative activity, and not by birth and power.

The merit of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is in its broad critical description of contemporary life and vivid pictures of nature. Byron's bright characters, beautiful pictures of nature and brilliant satirical power, rich and melodious verse will be admired by many generations to come. The poem established Byron as he major literary and romantic figure.



Byron revised and published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* during his travels to Europe in March 1812, and the third and fourth cantos were added later and published in 1816 and 1818 respectively. Byron envisioned *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as a poetic travelogue of his experiences in Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Albania, areas of Europe not under Napoleon Bonaparte's direct control. As a record of his journey through lands in which war was an ever-present specter, it is not surprising that much of the work meditates upon war, conquest, and violence in the name of one cause or another.



The poem also reflects Byron's political views, particularly his support for Greek independence from Turkey (a cause for which he would eventually fight and die) and the very close-to-home incident of the Convention of Cintra (stanzas 24-26), in which the English politicians allowed enemy French soldiers captured in battle to return to France with their loot intact. Besides his politics, Byron also includes his love for the East in his celebration of the peoples and places he encounters.





The ode "To lanthe" refers to Lady Charlotte Harley, daughter of Lady Oxford; both women were of amorous interest to Byron. Byron added the ode in the 7th edition of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1814. In *Byron: A Biography*, Leslie Marchand writes: "For Byron it was a delightful situation indeed at the Oxfords': in addition to his charming mistress he had the companionship of her lovely daughters. They were just at the ages that excited his romantic sentiments most profoundly. Lady Charlotte Harley, then eleven, was his favourite.

None could have more poignant sentiments of the beauty of youthful innocence than the disillusioned young lord who had known too early and too well the disappointments of love fading into satiety. His tribute to the child exceeded in warmth of idealization anything he ever wrote of her mother. Nothing could be more glowing than the five stanzas to this 'Young Peri of the West,' under the name of lanthe, which he prefaced to the seventh edition of Childe Harold (1814)."



Byron intentionally chose to write *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in the form of Spenserian stanzas, a fact to which he draws attention in the poem's preface. Each canto is made up of several nine-line stanzas, each focused on some aspect of the journey, but with several linked together by subject.





These stanzas are made up of eight lines in iambic pentameter, followed by a final line of twelve syllables, also written in iambic meter (known as an alexandrine line). Each stanza follows the rhyme scheme ABABBCBCC.



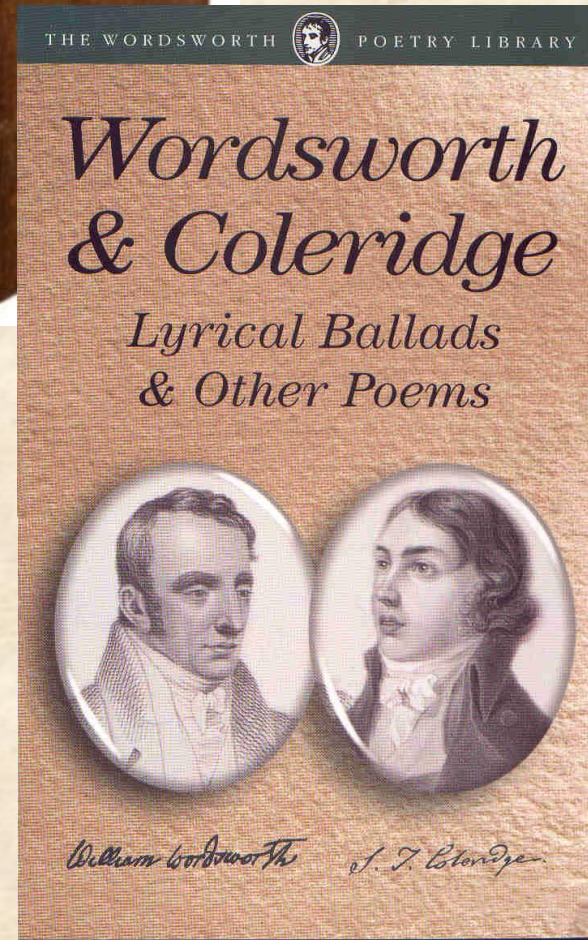
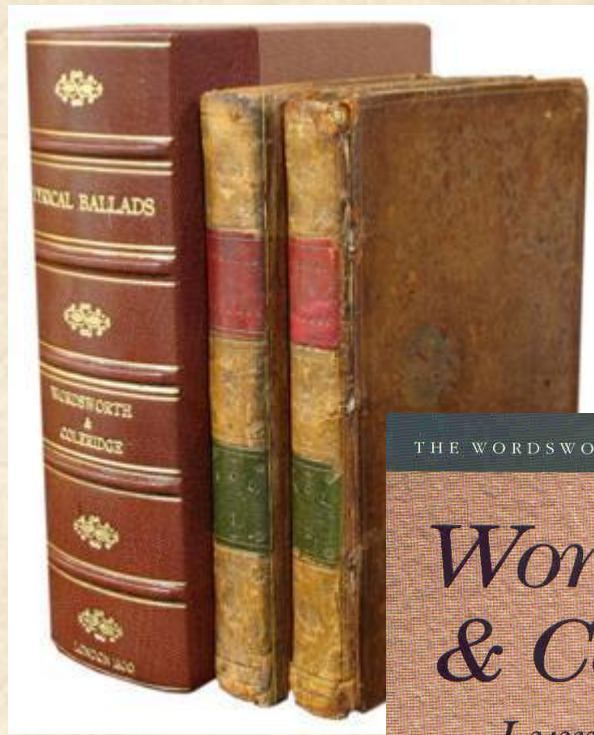
*I stood in Venia,
on the Bridge
of Sighs*



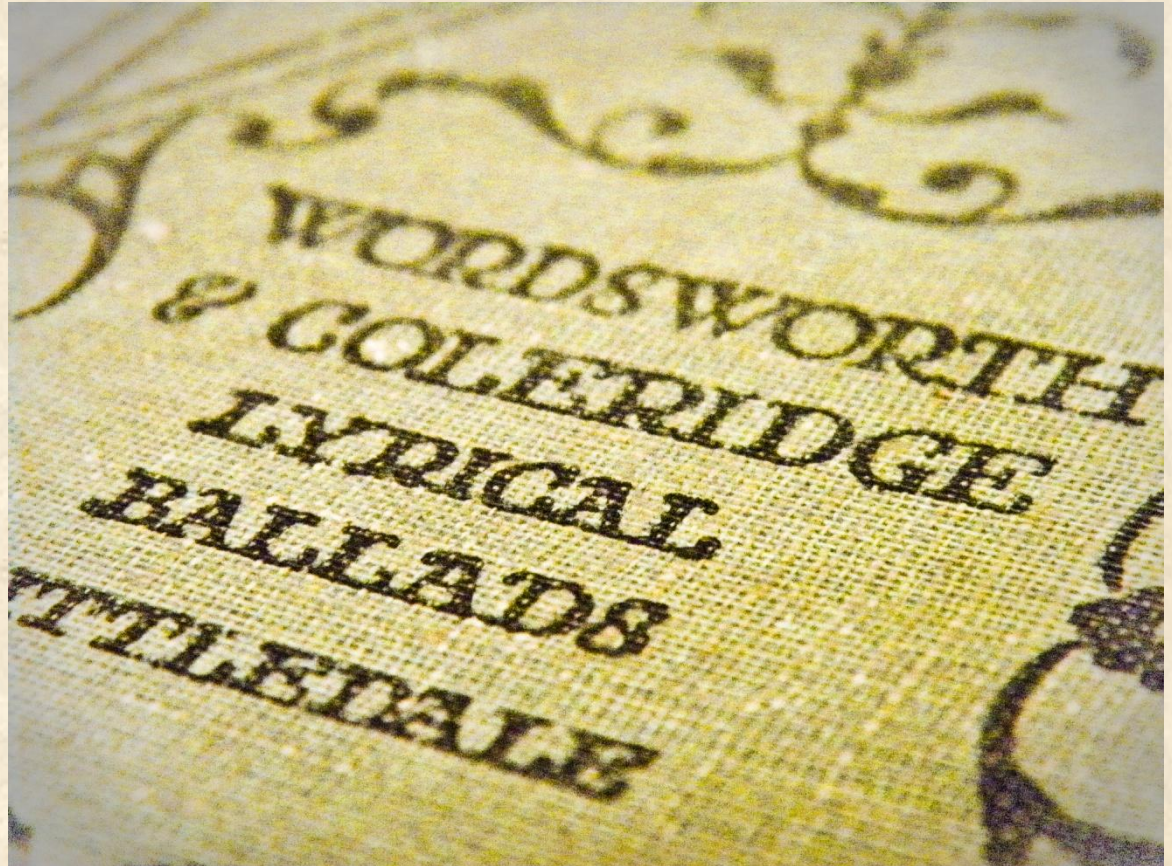
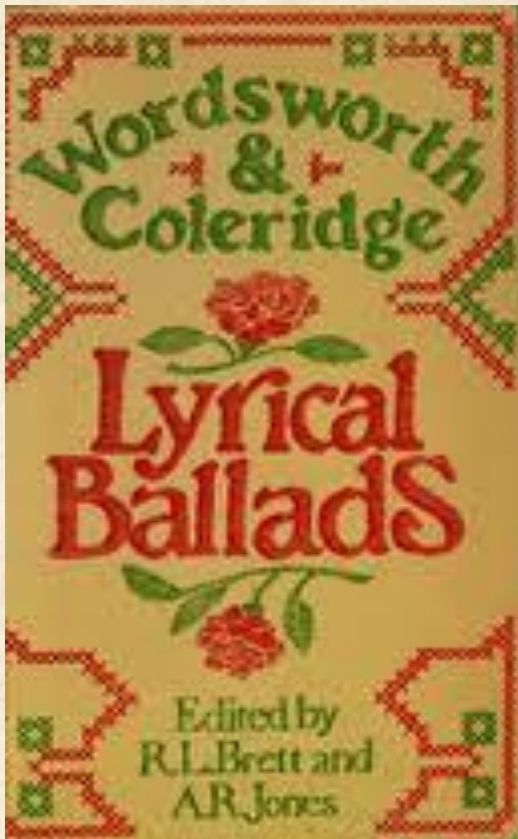
**CHILDE HAROLD'S
PILGRIMAGE**

Lord Byron

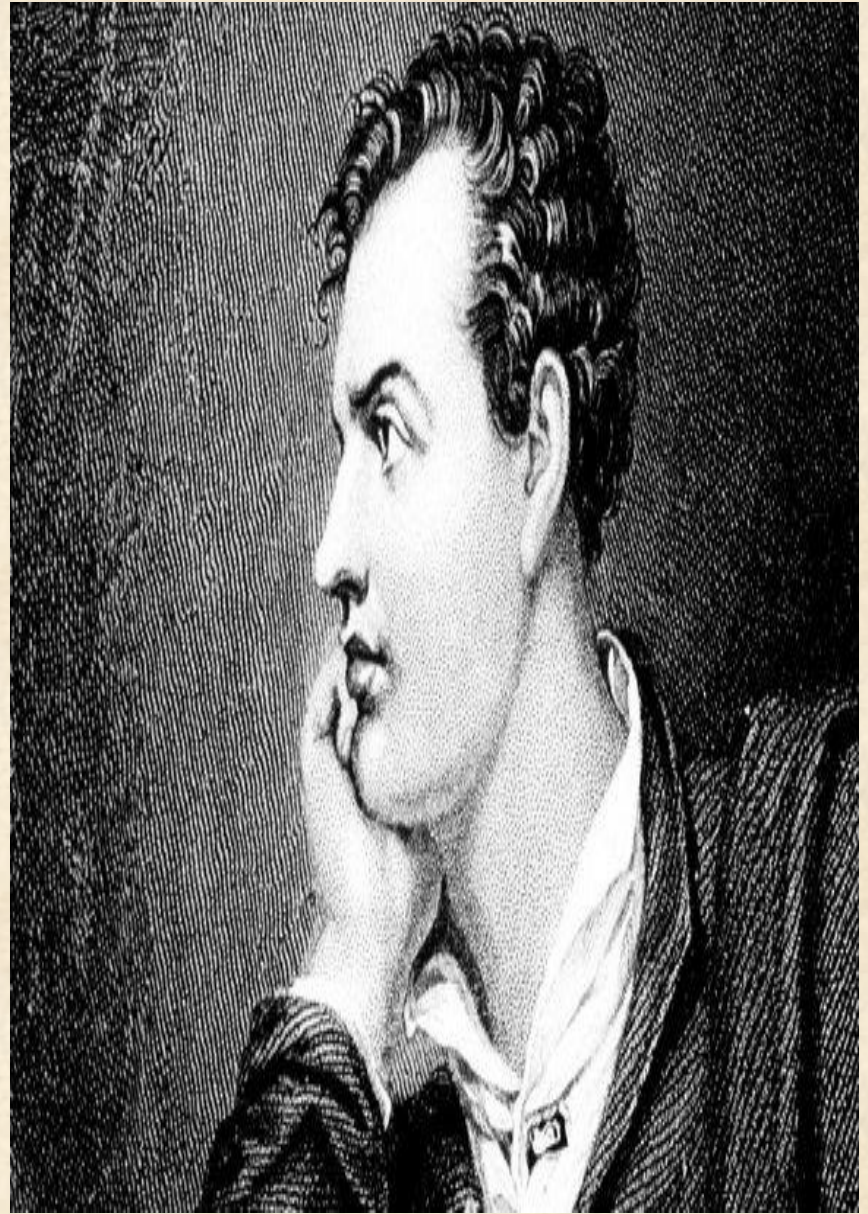
Byron also was self-consciously responding to earlier Romantic verse, particularly Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Byron engaged in a kind of love-hate relationship with Wordsworth (or at least Wordsworth's ideas) in his desire to simultaneously embrace the Romantic ideals set down by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their *Lyrical Ballads*, but at the same time to move beyond their views on nature as somehow superior to humanity and their apparent narcissism in placing themselves at the center of the universe.



Byron also opposed their political views in many areas, particularly in their desire to criticize other nations without engaging them directly (as Byron did when he joined the battle for Greek independence).



There are three Classical references to lanthe, but it is unclear which one (or more) Byron was alluding to when renaming Lady Charlotte. The first lanthe was a Cretan maid betrothed to Iphis, herself a woman raised as a man. Because of their love for one another, the goddess Isis changed Iphis into a man so that the two could be married. The second lanthe is one of the daughters of the titans Oceanus and Tethys, making her a sea-nymph. The third lanthe is a young woman whom the gods loved so dearly that they caused purple flowers to grow around her grave.



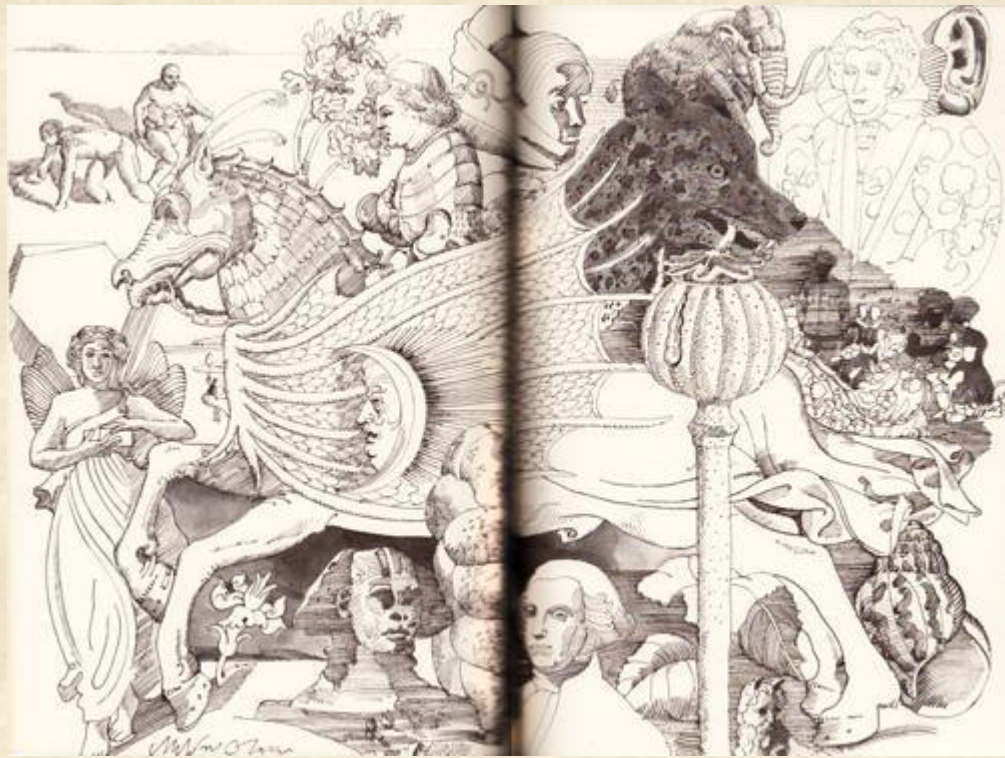
The first reference is the most intriguing, as Byron spent much of his life until 1814 wrestling with his own sexual identity. However, the third lanthe is simplest, since the real-life Lady Charlotte was only eleven years old when he met her and thus would invoke the purity of this maiden beloved of the gods. The second lanthe is a nymph, which places her in the running as a divinity worthy of being Byron's muse—and it is fact lanthe he invokes as his muse, in true Homeric tradition, prior to beginning his long narrative of Childe Harold's travels.





The first two cantos are primarily focused on poetic descriptions of the sights Childe Harold sees. Harold himself is almost invisible in much of the work, being a character through whom the reader gains his point of view, but who also does little to interact with the people or events described. This aloofness would later become a staple of Byron's melancholy heroes in such works as *Don Juan* and *Manfred*.

One main theme of the cantos is Byron's hatred of oppression. In Cantos I and II he describes the Spanish resistance to Napoleon's forces, clearly siding with the "noble" Spanish against these agents of tyranny. Later, he describes the Greeks as admirable people beaten into submission by their Turkish oppressors. In both cases, Byron takes the side of the "underdog" — a stance he would tend toward all his life. England was already allied with Spain against France, but even had she not been, Byron would likely have sided with the oppressed against the oppressor in any case.



Indeed, William Flesch notes that “the poem is about the meaning of freedom in all its forms—personal, political, poetic.” Byron himself felt social oppression and suffering at the hands of classmates during his school years; later in life he turned this into a general resistance to oppression. While not always consistent in his personal life, Byron would make this battle for independence and liberation central to his public persona through his poetry and political actions.

