

Review: Essie Fox, *Dangerous*. Orenda Books, 2025. 307 pp. ISBN 9781916788442, £16.99.

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ON 31 AUGUST 1813, Lord Byron sent a letter to Lady Melbourne which contained a story, written by Lord Sligo, about the origin of Byron's poem *The Giaour* (1813). Byron remarked: 'I think it will make you laugh when you consider all the poetry & prose which has grown out of it'.¹ From a twenty-first-century perspective, and in light of the long-term evolution of the Byronic hero and Byron's image in popular culture, these lines take on a prophetic quality. Essie Fox's choice to open her latest novel, *Dangerous*, with a quotation from *The Giaour* is not incidental. By quoting this poem, Fox aligns her work with a longstanding literary tradition that dates to the Romantic period, with works such as Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* (1816) and John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), which portray fictionalised accounts of the poet, blending elements from his life and works. These texts notably draw on *The Giaour*, whose protagonist is cursed with vampirism, to construct a fictionalised profile of Byron as the dangerous, even fatal, supernatural lover.

Dangerous is structured as a story within a story, playing with the idea that Vicar Thomas Gerrard Barber may have uncovered a fragment of Byron's memoirs when he opened the Byron family vault at the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Hucknall in 1938. The central plot is set in 1819, during Byron's residence at the Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice, and adopts the form of a mystery novel as the poet finds himself accused of the murder of two women. His implication in these crimes coincides with the circulation of rumours linking him to vampirism, exacerbated by the recent publication of Polidori's *Vampyre*. A similar premise appears in Stephanie Barron's novel *Jane and the Madness of Lord Byron* (2010), in which the poet is also cast as a murder suspect, with incriminating clues drawn from lines of *The Giaour*. In Barron's novel, Jane Austen must solve the mystery, while Byron is portrayed as a clichéd

¹ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals: Alas! The Love of Women*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand (John Murray, 1974), p. 102.

archetype of the fatal lover. In contrast, Fox's Byron becomes his own detective. This narrative device enables the author to construct a nuanced portrayal that is primarily concerned with revealing Byron's most human aspects beneath the layers of myth. Rather than perpetuating a sensationalised version of Byron, Fox draws attention to often-overlooked details, such as his fondness for his menagerie of animals and his affectionate, if complicated, relationship with his illegitimate daughter, Allegra. The novel also brings to the fore figures who played important roles in Byron's everyday life, such as his long-serving valet William Fletcher and his gondolier Tita – both of whom accompanied his body back to England after his death in 1824. These characters are frequently marginalised in works of biographical fiction in favour of more sensational figures such as Lady Caroline Lamb or the Shelleys. In *Dangerous*, Fox re-centres the working class, offering a more intimate portrayal of Byron's private world that is informed by the works of biographers such as Fiona MacCarthy.²

While the novel is well researched, with carefully crafted settings and characters that bring Byron's world to life, this attention to detail sometimes weakens the narrative focus as new subplots emerge and the central mystery becomes harder to follow. Yet this apparent unevenness can be read as a deliberate narrative strategy: by the end of the manuscript, the reader, like Barber, is left with several unanswered questions, reflecting the challenges historians face when working with incomplete records. By blending vivid episodes with underdeveloped plots and occasional gaps in information, Fox invites the reader to inhabit the role of the historian, highlighting the provisional and interpretive nature of reconstructing the past.

At the end of *Dangerous*, Fox includes a bibliography of sources that inform the novel's historical texture and underpin the development of key characters. Among these is Susan Vaughan, one of Byron's servants at Newstead Abbey, with whom he is believed to have had an affair. Little is known about Vaughan beyond her brief correspondence with the poet and her subsequent dismissal from his service, after which she disappears from the historical record. Fox uses this gap as a space for imaginative reconstruction. Another historical figure is the vicar, Thomas Gerrard Butler, who led the 1938 exhumation of Byron's vault. Fox uses this event to frame her narrative, drawing on the speculative possibility that Butler may have discovered a surviving fragment of Byron's lost memoirs. The bibliography reflects a wide range of

² Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (John Murray, 2002).

Byron scholarship, combining earlier and more recent sources. These include Gerrard Barber's *Byron and Where He Is Buried* (1939), Doris Langley Moore's *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered* (1974), Fiona MacCarthy's *Byron: Life and Legend* (2002), Richard Lansdown's *Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection* (2015), and Andrew Stauffer's *Byron: A Life in Ten Letters* (2024). Fox also signals a broader interest in the cultural history of the vampire through works such as Erik Butler's *The Rise of the Vampire* (2013) and Violet Fenn's *The History of the Vampire in Popular Culture* (2021). In drawing on nineteenth-century studies scholarship to inform her creative practice, Fox aligns her work with the emerging scholarly interest in Romantic afterlives and adaptation, as reflected by the 2025 International Byron Conference's theme of 'The Afterlives of Lord Byron'.³

Fox's novel also challenges problematic representations of the Byron-vampire myth commonly found in biographies and biographical fiction. While other narratives that associate Byron with vampirism tend to focus on fictionalised retellings of his Grand Tour – blending elements from *The Giaour*, such as the murder-revenge plot, with excerpts from Byron's letters and journals – these often perpetuate problematic representations of Euro-Orientalism. The curse that transforms Byron into a vampiric figure is frequently associated with his travels through Eastern Europe, depicted in such narratives as rural, archaic, and steeped in superstition. In *Dangerous*, however, Byron's association with vampires is situated at a later period of his life, while he resides in Venice in 1819, de-exoticising the myth. Essie Fox takes advantage of this chronology to align her plot with the publication of Polidori's *Vampyre*, which established the archetype of the Byronic vampire that would dominate twentieth and twenty-first-century Gothic fiction. Upon its initial publication, Polidori's tale was wrongly attributed to Byron as the result of a failed marketing strategy. Fox engages with a relatively recent field of inquiry in Romantic Studies: the emergence of celebrity culture, by foregrounding this episode and its consequences in her novel.⁴ Her nuanced treatment

³ 49th International Byron Conference: 'The Years That Followed: The Afterlives of Lord Byron', University of Pisa, 30 June–5 July 2025.

⁴ See Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Lindsey Eckert, *The Limits of Familiarity: Authorship and Romantic Readers* (Bucknell University Press, 2022).

of Byron reflects on how popular Romantic authors became commodified, misrepresented, and mythologised during the period, with lasting effects.

While Fox also sensationalises Byron by weaving historical fact with Gothic fiction, her approach is self-aware and critically reflective. She relocates the vampire myth from a fantasised East to Venice and turns the lens on Western culture's complicity in creating the legend of the Byronic Vampire. In doing so, *Dangerous* becomes not only a historical mystery but also a meta-commentary on authorship, celebrity, and the cultural afterlife of Romanticism. By interrogating the ways that Byron's public image has been shaped and circulated, Fox participates in discourse around how nineteenth-century authors persist in the twenty-first century – not as static historical subjects, but as mutable cultural figures. Fox's decision to reframe the vampiric mythos and foreground overlooked working-class figures challenges the hierarchies of representation that have long shaped both biographical fiction and Romantic studies and aligns her novel with trends in contemporary Romantic scholarship. *Dangerous* not only incorporates nineteenth-century studies scholarship but also models a creative practice that is historically grounded and ethically aware.



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