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The Promiscuity of Print: John Clare's "Don Juan" and the Culture of Romantic Celebrity

JASON N. GOLDSMITH

I awoke one morning and found myself famous.

—George Gordon, Lord Byron¹

Fame blazed upon me like a comets glare

Fame waned & left me like a fallen star.

—John Clare²

In 1840, John Clare was written off for dead. Not figuratively—by most accounts that had happened years earlier as sales and reviews of his work tapered off—but literally. On 17 June, *The Times* of London announced, “The poet Clare died some months ago at the Lunatic Asylum at York.”³ Only John Clare had not died. He was very much alive, a resident of the High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest. Somewhat surprised to read of the death of one of his patients, Matthew Allen, the asylum’s warden, wrote a correction to the *Times* on 23 June 1840: “The Northamptonshire peasant poet, John Clare, is a patient in my establishment at Highbeach, and has been so since July, 1837. He is at present in excellent health, and looks very well.”⁴ Not merely alive, Clare, by this account, is in the flush of fitness, “and even now at almost all times, the moment he gets pen or pencil in hand he begins to write most beautiful poetic effusions.”⁵

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Diagnosing Clare's "madness," Allen ascribes the poet's condition to "the oppressive and permanent state of anxiety, and fear, and vexation, produced by the excitement of excessive flattery at one time, and neglect at another, his extreme poverty and over exertion of body and mind."⁶ In essence, Clare suffered the vagaries of literary fame; his early and exuberant reception was no surety of a protracted or financially remunerative reputation. While the volatility of critical opinion that marked Clare's career certainly affected the poet's expectations, Allen is not so fanciful as to compare Clare to John Keats, who, to borrow a phrase from Byron, "was killed off by one critique."⁷ Rather, he is more pragmatic, suggesting that the vagaries of critical judgment had tangible effects on the writer's livelihood. "I had not then the slightest hesitation in saying," Allen held, "that if a small pension could be obtained for him, he would have recovered instantly, and most probably remained well for life."⁸

In one of the many "poetic effusions" that he composed at High Beach, Clare echoed Allen's remarks on the volatility of renown: "Fame blazed upon me like a comets glare / Fame waned & left me like a fallen star" (lines 426–7). But what Clare called fame in this poem, his version of "Child Harold" (1841), was more accurately what we have come to know as celebrity, a vitiated brand of renown in which media exposure fuels public interest in the individual's life and personality. In a letter of September 1821, for example, Clare, who shot to public prominence on the publication of his *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), complained of the "personal flattery" that his newfound popularity entailed. "I am sought after very much agen," he bemoaned from his cottage in Helpstone, "now 3 days scarcely pass off but somebody calls . . . surely the vanity woud have kill'd me 4 years ago if I had known then how I shoud have been hunted up—& extolld by personal flattery—but let me wait another year or two & t[he] peep show will be over."⁹ Clare sounds thoroughly modern decriing his loss of privacy. His reference to the peep show, in which the individual has become the object of an anonymous, voyeuristic gaze, both serves as an apt metaphor for the popular and spectacular nature of Romantic celebrity and points to the new dispensation of public and private, of exposure, acclaim, and authenticity that so vexed Romantic-era writers.

Branded, hyped, and then remaindered as "The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet," Clare was unable subsequently to escape from a celebrity persona that owed much of its currency to his own contributions. At the outset of his career, when Clare was eager

for a public, such a role suited him. But as he sought to expand on his reception, to be considered a “poet” without the qualifying “peasant,” Clare found his audience, his patrons, and his publishers less than receptive. Against this ascendancy of readers and the emergence of a new literary-critical class (men such as Francis Jeffrey, William Gifford, John Wilson, John Gibson Lockhart, and William Jerdan) that sought to shape the public’s taste, the high Romantics apotheosized the poet’s unique individuality as a way of retaining cultural authority in an increasingly industrialized literary culture. But that very culture, looking to capitalize on the writer’s renown, converted the writer’s person into a symbolic asset. In this age of personality, identity had become an alienable commodity. It was less Clare the flesh-and-blood writer than the idea of Clare the rustic poet, an idealized representation circulated through a burgeoning periodical press, that captured the public’s imagination. “John Clare” was a unit of cultural capital mass produced and mass marketed to a variety of political and commercial ends by the diverse participants—writer, editors, publishers, booksellers, patrons, reviewers, readers—variously invested in its success.¹⁰ “I acknowledge, dear Cousin,” one of Clare’s early benefactors, Edward Drury, frankly admitted, “that I desire to secure to myself some merit in bringing this rustic genius into notice” (*CH*, p. 3).

It is these complex interrelations among poetry, literary celebrity, and commerce that focus my discussion in this essay, which offers a new reading of Clare’s neglected yet provocative poem “Don Juan,” a hard-hitting and deliberately vulgar denunciation of English society and letters.¹¹ In this extended Byronic performance, Clare’s dialectical fashioning of the economic and the aesthetic most forcefully resolves on the third term by which he configured his literary history, the erotic. Eroticizing his experience of the literary marketplace, Clare conjoins the book and skin trades, figuring publication itself as promiscuous. Defiantly redeploing what he saw as the exploitative aspects of celebrity authorship, Clare styles himself the Byron of this erotic economy.

Philip W. Martin has argued that Clare’s two “Byron poems” “bear within them the signs of his own fraught relations with the reviewers.”¹² In mapping what might be best described as a poetics of promiscuity, I argue that Clare looked to resist the discourses producing him as “The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet” by privileging the frequently vulgar reality of lived experience in opposition to both aesthetic and commercial idealism. Clare harnessed Byron’s famed sexual appetite and strong Romantic

irony to dramatic effect, countering the consumption of signs that marked late Romantic literary trade by privileging material bodies. Tracing Clare's imaginative and textual investments in prostitutes and boxers, figures located at the margins of London's criminal underworld, I will show how the compulsive misogyny of "Don Juan" and its obscene sexual punning form part of a concerted, if not entirely coherent, response to a culture increasingly organized by the spectacle of celebrity.

I

At first blush, Clare's "Don Juan" is a disturbing poem. The blunt misogyny of the opening stanza marks a significant departure from poems such as "The Badger," "Little Trotty Wagtail," and "The Yellowhammer's Nest," launching instead a deliberately indecorous stance that Clare sustains over the poem's thirty-four *ottava-rima* stanzas.

"Poets are born"—& so are whores—the trade is
 Grown universal—in these canting days
 Women of fashion must of course be ladies
 & whoreing is the business—that still pays
 Playhouses Ball rooms—there the masquerade is
 —To do what was of old—& now adays
 Their maids—nay wives so innoſcent & blooming
 Cuckold their ſpouſes to ſeem honeſt women.

(lines 1–8)

For all the intensity of this *louche* exposé of fashionable society, few critics have been willing seriously to engage the erotics of Clare's verse. Most, like William D. Brewer, ascribe the aggressive sexuality to pent-up frustration: "Forgotten in an asylum, without the female companionship that he craved, Clare found some relief in a cynical and sexist pose."¹³ Undoubtedly, Clare missed the physical companionship of women. One of the poem's most personal stanzas bemoans, "How I should like to purchase some sweet woman / Or else creep in with my two wives to night" (lines 193–4). Yet such a reading fails to account for the sustained and deep-seated animosity "Don Juan" directs at women. In lines such as "Wherever mischief is tis womans brewing," "Marriage is nothing but a driveling hoax," and "A wife is just the prototype to hate," Clare returns with such compulsive regularity to this

misogynous stance that we cannot dismiss it as merely a textual safety valve (lines 15, 25, and 37).

So intense does this misogyny read on the page that Lynn Pearce retracted her commitment to reading it altogether. “[John Clare] took up five years of my life that could have been much better spent doing something else,” she declared, suggesting that “[t]he catalogues of names and addresses found in Northampton MS 19, for example, are as disturbing as those sometimes found amongst the documents of sex-murders.”¹⁴ Pearce’s comments are extreme but instructive. In forcing critics to face the more obscene parts of Clare’s life and work, she identifies the critical irresponsibility of dismissing his comments as a pose. Nevertheless, I am not convinced he deserves to be compared to a sex murderer, a critical label that now brands and dismisses him as much as “peasant poet” did in his lifetime. In no way do I want to excuse Clare’s misogyny. Rather, I hope to rescue him from the polarized readings represented by those of Brewer and Pearce.

We might dismiss “Don Juan” as the product of an unstable mind. After all, Clare exhibited a variety of symptoms including mood swings, hallucinations, the persistent fantasy that he possessed two wives—his real wife, Martha Turner, and his childhood love, Mary Joyce—and spectacular delusions of identity wherein he declared himself Shakespeare, Byron, the first Duke of Wellington, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the prizefighter Jack Randall. But to do so would be to mistake the nature and extent of his illness.¹⁵ As long as we consider Clare’s mental illness no more than an organic psychological defect, our assessments of “Don Juan” will merely confirm his madness. But as Allen suggested, there was a clear social component to the poet’s illness. Clare’s unstable psychological state should be not the end of discussion but rather the point from which to begin a sustained and detailed investigation of the misogyny of “Don Juan” and the poetic self that Clare constructs from this rhetorical stance.

At the same time that he was drafting “Don Juan,” Clare was describing women in extraordinarily compassionate terms. In “The Courtship,” for example, Clare confessed, “The muses they get all the praise / But woman makes the poet,” attesting an immense and heartfelt debt to his wife, Martha Turner, whom he had married in March 1820 shortly after the publication of *Poems Descriptive*.¹⁶ Two stanzas later he forthrightly declared:

The muses they are living things
& beauty ever dear

& though I worshiped stocks & stones
 Twas woman every where.¹⁷

This sentiment contrasts sharply with the spleen of "Don Juan." In plainspoken praise that conveys his sincerity, Clare dismisses both the rural landscape and the idealized muses of poetic convention and argues instead that his imaginative development owes to the flesh and blood women in his life. That Clare could simultaneously produce such conflicting representations suggests that something more than a hatred of women motivates the misogyny of "Don Juan."

II

"[M]isogyny in representations is not about women but rather about society: representations that inspire passionate hatred of women and disgust with the female body provide a place for people to work out passionate feelings about changes in economic and social structure."¹⁸ Laura Mandell's lucid discussion of how eighteenth-century literary texts deploy misogynous representations to facilitate or resist the rise of industrial capitalism points to a socioeconomic context in which we might situate the misogynous rhetoric of "Don Juan." Indeed, her book *Misogynous Economies* provides something of a prehistory of what Marlon B. Ross has characterized as a Romantic myth of "masculine self-possession," an aesthetic will-to-power that looks to recuperate poetry as a socially significant activity "by both overt and subliminal appeals to the virility and masculinity of [the poet's] creative project."¹⁹ The extent to which the literary field, and poetry in particular, had become "feminized" during the Romantic period has been extensively described in the work of critics such as Ross, Stuart Curran, Anne K. Mellor, and Paula R. Feldman.²⁰ Not only were women enthusiastic consumers of literature, but they were also, in significant and increasing numbers, producers, publishing fiction, poetry, and drama to much popular and critical success. Excepting Byron, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon were the best-selling poets of the 1820s and 1830s.²¹

Clare had to compete against such popular figures when, looking to capitalize on the success of *Poems Descriptive*, he published three additional collections: *The Village Minstrel* (1821), *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), and *The Rural Muse* (1835). These failed to match the success of his first volume, though, and Clare was forced back to what he called "hard labor" to pay the bills—not

the hack work of his Grub Street predecessors but the manual labor of rural life. Stung by his commercial failure, Clare, like most of his male counterparts, exhibited a typical defensiveness that belittles the commercial successes of female writers: “if I dont yet know what is Poetry & who are Poets,” he wrote to George Darley late in 1827, “Fashion shall not make me believe she does with in spite of her trumpeting clamour about her L.E.Ls. Hemans’s Dartford Moorians &c but I dont wish to be nasty among these Delacrusan gentry & I am sure I shall if I go on for one has no patience with the humbug that teams from the Literary stews Monthly & Weekly aye & daily & almost hourly for I expect bye & bye we shall have ‘Hourly papers’ chiming over their praises as we have ‘Daily ones’ now.”²² Reacting here to the influence of critics, who increasingly came to arbitrate public taste and thus define the nature of poetry, Clare dismisses this shift in power by intimating that in the world of fashion what defines the poet is not so much achievement as it is media exposure. Coordinating the popular success of the female poet with the commercial press, Clare damns both by association. He distances himself from the kind of promiscuous success women attain through the publicity afforded by these “Literary stews”—textual brothels as it were—by rejecting the claims of fashion.²³ Fashion was a significant concept for Clare, and he returns to it in the opening stanza of “Don Juan,” where the gendered image of “Women of fashion” is ironically and syntactically linked to “the business—that still pays,” whoring. Freighted with the charge of capitalism, women provided Clare with symbols by which to negotiate his own ambivalent relationship to the literary establishment. But by characterizing Landon, Hemans, and Hannah More as “Delacrusan gentry,” Clare inflects the conventional gender politics of this reactionary stance with a reference to socioeconomic status.

This intermingling of class and gender is especially evident in a letter Clare wrote to Taylor’s partner, James Augustus Hesse, in July 1820. While *Poems Descriptive* had met with general praise on its release earlier that year, two poems, “My Mary” and “Dolly’s Mistake,” were deemed indecorous and expunged from the third edition. “I have seen the third Edition [of *Poems Descriptive*] & am cursed mad about it.” Clare fumed,

false delicacy damn it I hate it beyond every thing those
 primpt up misses brought up in those seminaries of mys-
 terious wicknedness (Boarding Schools) what will please
 em? why we well know—but while their heart & soul loves

to extravagance (what we dare not mention) false delicacy's seriousness muscles up the mouth & condemns it—what in the name of delicacy doth poor Dolly say to incur such malice as to have her artless lamentations shut out—they blush to read what they go nightly to balls for & love to practice alas false delicacy . . . T. woud not be offended to find me vext I think at the omissions he k[now]s him self in so doing the gold is lickd off the gingerbread.²⁴

The significance of this incident cannot be overstated. Institutionalized at High Beach some twenty years later, Clare recycled the phrase that closes this passage in "Don Juan": "Truth is shut up in prison while ye're licking / The gold from off the gingerbread" (lines 243–4). What proved so unsettling to Clare was that he found himself subject to a moral standard from which the rich exempted themselves behind closed doors. The unacknowledged yet widely circulated affairs of titled women such as Lady Caroline Lamb or Lady Jane Elizabeth Harley, Countess of Oxford, for example, whose children were reputed to be of different fathers and were known as the "Harleian Miscellany," forced on Clare an acute sense of his own socially disempowered situation.²⁵

Indeed, Clare's status as a poet was marked by a blunt classism transacted both privately and publicly. "Clare has exhibited powers that not only justify but demand attention and kindness," wrote John Gibson Lockhart in his review of *Poems Descriptive for Blackwood's*, "but his generous and enlightened patrons ought to pause ere they advise him to become anything else than a peasant—for a respectable peasant is a much more comfortable man, and always will be so, than a mediocre poet" (*CH*, p. 103). Closer to home, one of Clare's first patrons, Lord Radstock, looked to shape Clare to his own conservative ideals: "I cannot be satisfied that Clare is really as honest & upright as I could wish him!" he complained, "tell Clare if he has still a recollection of what I have done, and am still doing for him, he must give me unquestionable *proofs*, of being that man I would have him to be—he *must expunge!*" (*CH*, p. 61). As Radstock's demand indicates, it was not only the poems but also the poet that was subject to moral and social regulation. Thus, deliberately and quite publicly, Clare was reminded of the role, or roles, he was expected to perform. In response to such demands, he cleverly proposed to Hessey in 1820, "I think to please all & offend all we should put out 215 pages of blank leaves and call it 'Clare in fashion.'"²⁶ The irony notwithstanding, in recommending such an audacious project

Clare exhibits an extraordinary awareness of the new and unstable relationship between writers and their audiences. “Clare in fashion” was just that, a fashionable symbolic asset that the public would write for themselves.²⁷

Fashion thus coordinates a constellation of topics—literary commerce, critical reception, authorial identity, the status of poetry, patrons, public, and the press—on which “Don Juan” draws to confront what Clare saw as the hypocrisy of “these canting days” (line 2). The real force of the opening stanza, then, lies in its compression. In detailing an erotic economy founded on artifice, Clare delivers a class-conscious critique of literary culture, exposing the extent to which representation has come to mediate social exchange: “the trade is / Grown universal” (lines 1–2). From the asylum at High Beach, Clare looked out on a world where representation bore little resemblance to material circumstance.

III

But the misogynous rhetoric by which Clare contested his authorial identity is part of a more fundamental psycholinguistic process at work in “Don Juan.” In analyzing the affective structures mobilized by misogynous representations, Mandell draws on the work of Julia Kristeva: “Misogyny is thus one element in the process of abjection that instills in people love of a masculinized, immortal ideal.”²⁸ For Kristeva, abjection is the psychic mechanism that underlies all kinds of social proscriptions, including racism, nationalism, misogyny, and class taboos—those historically specific acts of social violence by which communities erect and maintain the distinctions that determine who and what they are. But these social acts of individuation are instances of a primary repression rooted, ultimately, in prelinguistic bodily experience, a primal psychological break that establishes that border between the self and (m)other necessary for the development of identity: “The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy, breaking away.”²⁹ Purging the body of all that is unclean, abjection civilizes the individual, bringing him or her into line with social law. As Kristeva avers, “The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic.”³⁰ This ideal identity, though, what Kristeva calls *le corps-propre*, is never

secure. Subjectivity never stabilizes, and the distinctions between self and other must be endlessly renewed by violently casting off whatever undoes difference, whatever unleashes uncertainty or ambiguity. Yet, if abjection establishes the distinctions that stabilize identity in accordance with social norms, it is also the point at which those distinctions verge on collapse. For this very reason, we are as fascinated as we are frightened by the abject, an unlicensed, affective force that disrupts the oppressive law of social convention. The abject frees the individual to step outside the lines, to rewrite the sociosymbolic "law of the father."

As an author, Clare was civilized. He was fashioned to conform to socially acceptable models of behavior.³¹ And it is this alienating process of socializing that Clare undoes in his factious Byronic performance. "Don Juan" is less a poem of Clare's madness than it is a poem that manifests the affective force of abjection. From the very first line, the marks of abjection are evident: "Poets are born' & so are whores" (line 1). Indeed, Clare's career as a poet bears an uncanny resemblance to that of most prostitutes. Like most young women who entered "the trade," Clare was of the laboring class. He came from the country, and his career was plied through the city. His run of commercial viability was short lived. His profession left him open to exploitation and prejudice and never put him on secure financial footing. Finally, his labor created lucrative possibilities for numerous other individuals: he was a worker in a diffuse industry, "the trade."³² Tossed from the heights of Parnassus, Clare's poet falls into the flesh and, like the prostitute, participates in an economy of exchange where they—both poet and prostitute—are consumable commodities. In comparing the poet and the prostitute, Clare joined a long tradition of correlating these two trades. "Whore's the like reproachful name, as poetess—the luckless twins of shame," wrote Robert Gould in 1691.³³ But that tradition had correlated *female* poets to prostitutes. Situating the male poet in the position of a prostitute, Clare transgresses fixed gender roles. The opening line enacts a sort of textual transvestism that complicates not only the poem's misogyny but also the gender divisions that sustained social relations.

The prostitute, then, was a lever to power. Catharine Gallagher has shown how Aphra Behn, for example, appropriated the traditional conjunction of female writer and whore to empower her own identity and agency as author.³⁴ Clare similarly drew on the promiscuous agency of the prostitute in order to probe the limits of his authorial identity. The abject force of the prostitute

is revealed in Clare's autobiographical fragments. Of the anxiety evoked by his first visit to London in 1820, Clare recalled how a friend "used to caution me if ever I happened to go to be on my guard as if I once lost my way I should [be] sure to lose my life as the street Ladies would inveigle me into a fine house were I should never be seen again" (*BH*, p. 138). Linking sexual desire to death, this passage displaces the erotic charge of prostitution, which contravened clear gender roles, onto a criminal behavior that threatens the very existence of the individual. The anticipated transaction is consummated not in sexual activity but in an exchange of positions whereby the customer is converted into a commodity to be consumed by the prostitute.

So threatening is this eroticized female body that Clare metonymically transposes the vaginal menace of the "street Ladies" to the streets themselves: "and he described the pathways on the street," Clare continued, "as full of trap door[s] which drop down as soon as pressed with the feet and sprung in their places after the unfortunate countryman had fallen into the deep hole as if nothing had been where he were" (*BH*, p. 138). The popular if vulgar euphemism for the female genitalia, "nothing," sexualizes street crime, styling London as something of a whore. This is exactly the panic of abjection: to be re-incorporated. Once inside this vaginal snare, the unsuspecting countryman would be "robbed and murdered and thrown into boiling chauldrons kept continually boiling for that purpose and his bones sold to the doctors" (*BH*, p. 138). Not content with merely robbing their victims, these criminals treat the body as a commodity by which to maximize profit, and Clare imagines an industrialized criminal process in which the lifeless corpse is dismembered, its various pieces distributed to meet a rapacious consumer demand.

In his detailed survey of the sex trade, Tony Henderson observed that "[i]t was prostitution's apparently intimate link with crime and public disorder that came most to exercise the minds of those in authority by the beginning of the nineteenth century."³⁵ It is this discourse that Clare tapped into in his autobiographical writings. And it is the disorder associated with an unlicensed and criminal female sexuality that manifests the force of abjection to which Clare would return in "Don Juan" when, midway through the poem, the opening line is recast: "'Poets are born' & so are whores for sinning" (line 202). There is a certain Blakean iconoclasm to this formulation, and Clare textually recuperates the affective force of abjection embodied by the prostitute in his vulgar sexual punning: "there's such putting in—in whore's crim

con / Some mouths would eat forever & eat on" (lines 63–4). Clare's use of the legal term "crim con," slang for adultery, clarifies exactly what is being put in those seemingly insatiable "mouths," which the editors gloss as slang for the "female pudenda."³⁶ While we tend today to restrict conversation to verbal communication, etymologically it more broadly signifies intercourse, including sexual intercourse. This confusion of orifices (those bodily openings where identity is most conspicuously crossed by the interminable flow—excrement, tears, blood, food—of material drive) is true to abjection and collapses linguistic, sexual, and ingestive practices.

For Clare, "crim con" invokes the spectre of criminal—illicit or seditious—speech, an "idiolect" through which he might disrupt sociosymbolic law.³⁷ In a letter dated 31 August 1822, for example, Charles Lamb invoked "the true rustic style, the Arcadian English" and urged Clare to "Transplant Arcadia to Helpstone," for "in poetry *slang* of every kind is to be avoided . . . the ungenial coalition of barbarous with *refined* phrases will prevent you in the end from being so generally tasted, as you deserve to be" (*CH*, p. 175). Like Clare's metaphor of "crim con," Lamb's vocabulary here correlates publishing to consumption. Lamb was genuinely interested in helping Clare, whom he had met through Taylor, and wanted his work to be widely *tasted*. But, like most of his counterparts, Lamb preferred William Wordsworth's version of "the real language of men," a language "purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust," to Clare's unrefined Northamptonshire vernacular.³⁸ Lamb's Arcadia, as Clare realized, masked the ideological force of language; "grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government," he complained in a letter to Taylor early in his career, "confound the bitch Ill never be her slave & have a vast good mind not to alter the verse in question."³⁹ Correlating grammar to tyranny, Clare understood that language was power.

Willing if not quite content at the outset of his career to conform to the polite standards of the reading public, Clare looked to Taylor for help in editing his work to such standards. But as that work failed to garner the critical or popular success he desired, he took up those very items by which the critics sought to dismiss him—his rude grammar, neologisms, dialect, and slang—as symbols of difference, positively charged marks of his own self-constructed authorial identity. In his increasing resistance to grammatical conformity, Clare tests the borders of his authorial identity. Such symbolic resistance reaches its apex in "Don Juan,"

which is shot through with a vulgar street slang: "Prince Albert goes to Germany & must he / Leave the queens *snuff box* where all fools are *strumming*" (lines 86–7, emphasis added). Clare baits his readers with a sexually charged street slang; fools *strum*, that is they play, on the queen's *snuff box*, which the editors gloss as the female pudenda.⁴⁰ Such vulgarisms abound in "Don Juan," confronting the priggish propriety by which literary and social culture sought to control border figures such as Clare. Much like Byron, who wrote to Douglas Kinnaird of his poem "Don Juan," "it may be profligate, but is it not life, is it not *the thing*?" Clare saw truth in vulgarity.⁴¹ In his own "Don Juan," however, Clare avoids the intricate subtleties of Byron's sexual punning for a more explicit profligacy—"crim con" (line 63), "the queens snuff box" (line 87)—that forces conventional meaning to its limits where it must be remade if it is not to collapse into nonsense.

IV

Clare announced the disruptive intent of "Don Juan" in a letter to Eliza Phillips in 1841: "I do not much like to write love letters but this which I am now writing to you is a true one . . . I am now writing a New Canto of Don Juan which I have taken the liberty to dedicate to you in remembrance of Days gone bye."⁴² It is a curious sort of love letter, though, that begins, "My dear Eliza Phillips, Having been cooped up in this Hell of a Madhouse till I seem to be disowned by my friends & even forgot by my enemies for there is none to accept my challenges which I have from time to time given to the public I am almost mad in waiting for a better place & better company & all to no purpose."⁴³ One of those challenges survives in Northampton MS 8. Assuming the persona of the legendary boxer Jack Randall, Clare declared himself "Ready to Meet Any Customer In The Ring Or On The Stage To Fight For The Sum Of £500 or £1000" (*BH*, p. 266).⁴⁴ Cyrus Redding, who had visited Clare at High Beach, recorded this propensity in the *English Journal* of 15 May 1841:

The principal token of his mental eccentricity was the introduction of prize-fighting, in which he seemed to imagine he was to engage; but the allusion to it was made in the way of interpolation in the middle of the subject on which he was discoursing, brought in abruptly, and abandoned with equal suddenness, and an utter want of any connection with any association of ideas which it could be

thought might lead to the subject at the time; as if the machinery of thought were dislocated, so that one part of it got off its pivot, and protruded into the regular workings; or as if a note had got into a piece of music which had no business there.

(*CH*, p. 248)

Deploying a variety of extended metaphors to best describe the process of dissociated thought, Redding observes that Clare's delusion occurs abruptly, disrupting the logical flow of conversation. Such discursive breaks are the rhetorical mark of abjection, points where narrative and the self-unity it underwrites relapse into ambiguity and disorder. Just as significant, though, is the figure through which Clare hypostatizes his revolt in identity. A boxer is his body. But it is anything but a clean and proper body. The sport parades a sadomasochism saturated in the unspoken homoeroticism of two male bodies engaged in the brute, animalistic exchange of blows. It is a body displaying the grotesquerie of abjection: bruised and battered, battering and bruising. It is a subversive, brawling body by which the poet looked to defy prevailing social codes.

Institutionalized and abandoned, his attempts to author himself having failed, Clare inscribed his own identity within a kaleidoscopic and rapidly shifting assortment of personas, from boxers and military heroes to poets and playwrights. Intrigued by Clare's assumption of such celebrity personas, G. J. De Wilde, editor of the *Northampton Mercury*, asked the poet, "Who are you? These are Byron's and Shakespeare's verses, not yours!" and received for his answer: "It's all the same . . . I'm John Clare now. I was Byron and Shakespeare formerly. At different times you know I'm different people—that is the same person with different names."⁴⁵ By adopting the celebrity status of his more blue-chip counterparts, Byron or Shakespeare or Jack Randall, Clare disrupts and disputes the brand identity of the Northamptonshire Peasant Poet that had been narrated in the public press.⁴⁶ At the height of his supposed madness, Clare here reveals a basic property of Romantic literary celebrity: the purely arbitrary relation between name and personal identity. It is the very mobility of the name through which Clare asserts the underlying integrity of his personhood, distancing himself from public representation.

In "Don Juan," Clare appropriates and defiantly redeploys the machinery of literary celebrity whereby he had been dissociated from his poetic identity: "Lord Byron poh—the man wot rites the

werses / & is just what he is & nothing more" (lines 263–4), Clare writes in his version of "Don Juan," simultaneously collapsing the gulf between himself and the celebrated peer and depicting poeticizing as performance.⁴⁷ It is not surprising that Byron should have so captured Clare's imagination. Here was a poet who could excite the public's appetite. Byron, too, was obsessed with his body. Overweight as a child and self-conscious of his club foot, Byron took to boxing, fencing, and swimming, coupling vigorous exercise, an ascetic's diet of biscuits and soda water, and the frequent use of purgatives to physically refashion his body and himself into the brooding Romantic hero so celebrated in word and image.

Byron proved a potent symbol of literary, social, and financial independence—a poetic freebooter who scorned the very market that had assured his success—and Clare viewed Byron's career as a series of transgressions, both sexual and textual, against a critical hegemony that sought to normalize and control poetic expression.⁴⁸ As Byron, Clare becomes a figure "Who with his pen lies like the mist disperses" (line 265, emphasis added). Seizing the Byronic phallus/pen, Clare undercuts the fashionable practice that popular acclaim had made of Romantic poeticizing:

I wish I had a quire of foolscap paper
 Hot pressed—& crowpens—how I could endite
 A silver candlestick & green wax taper
 Lord bless me what fine poems I would write

 Though laurel wreaths my brows did ne'er environ
 I think myself as great a bard as Byron.

(lines 279–86)

The poem is here less imaginative act than commodity product, and this stanza satirizes the public's taste for luxury goods by metonymically linking the quality of a poem to the "fine" material—"foolscap paper," "crow pens"—from which it is produced. Drafting his poem in the confines of the asylum, Clare was not writing by the light of a silver candlestick with a green wax taper. Nevertheless, he composes his poetic indictment, and, eschewing the laurels of public opinion, writes as Byron on his own terms.

Clare, rather, was writing from a position of dispossession. He had been tasted, as Lamb had put it, and found literary commerce to be a threatening mode of consumption. Not only had his four volumes failed to bring him the financial independence

he desired, but his fifteen minutes of fame had dispossessed him of his very identity. Consumption proves one of the most persistent tropes of "Don Juan." "Night hides the wh—e – cupboards tart & pastry," Clare observes in the third stanza (line 23). In the marketplace, of course, the prostitute was a consumable product, a tart as it were, and the poem builds its emphatic sense of irony on the prurient logic of such linguistic arrangements. But the economic import of consumption extends well beyond the parameters of prostitution:

Lord what a while those good days are in coming—
Routs Masques & Balls—I wish they were a dream
—I wish for poor men luck—an honest praxis
Cheap food & cloathing—no corn laws or taxes.

(lines 45–8)⁴⁹

This forthright political critique contrasts the spectacular lifestyles of the rich and titled to the material privations borne by the working class, who were barely able to clothe or feed themselves. Such hardships were exacerbated by Corn Laws and taxes, acoustically linked to the honest praxis that Clare wished for his peers. But he knew that wishing was of little use:

I wish—but there is little got by wishing
I wish that bread & great coats ne'er had risen
I wish that there was some such word as 'pishun
For rhyme sake for my verses must be dizen
With dresses fine—as hooks with baits for fishing.

(lines 49–53)

The broad humor of these lines hides, I think, a more serious complaint. And while Clare's handling of Byron's offhand style is clumsy at best, the stakes for which Clare writes, it seems to me, are just as high. The poem here laments the rampant inflation, empty promises, and lack of reform that kept prices at unnecessarily high levels, creating undue hardship for the laboring class. The deliberately political complaint is focused by the terse anaphoric phrases manifesting the poem's persistent desire, "I wish," and enabling Clare to correlate a government unresponsive to working-class needs with the class-prejudiced politics of the literary trade.

In such a state, Clare realizes he must adorn his poem in fashionable phrases, "dresses fine," if he is to attract the eye of

the buying public. The analogy reaches its full import, though, only when this sartorial-semantic metaphor is further linked to “baits for fishing.” Like a prostitute, a poem must be dazzlingly garbed, if only to be stripped and consumed, one more commodity in a circuit of luxury goods:

Children are fond of sucking sugar candy
 & maids of sausages—larger the better
 Shopmen are fond of good sigars & brandy
 & I of blunt—& if you change the letter
 To C or K it would be quite as handy
 & throw the next away—but I'm your debtor
 For modesty—yet wishing nought between us
 I'd hawl close to a she as vulcan did to venus.

(lines 65–72)

The desire to consume that prostitution incites, satisfies, and exploits is here dispersed across a variety of manufactured goods—sugar candy, cigars, brandy. But the erotic threat is not defused by this. The near pornographic image of maids and sausages inscribes commerce within the sexual field. Consumer desire remains erotically charged but only to a certain degree; there is nothing particularly promiscuous about either shopmen and brandy or children and sugar candy. The stanza's erotic force remains distinctly feminine, and the poet rhetorically aligns himself with this decidedly female prurience. “Blunt,” slang for money, is easily convertible to the female genitalia, and it is the poet's facility with language that enables such textual transactions in the first place. The textual, the sexual, and the fiscal oscillate wildly along with the densely packed rhyme scheme, and Clare remains a “debtor / For modesty.” In each register, our fall from the financial to the physical is delayed by the well-placed line break.

While this passage would seem to have little to do with marriage, the use of economic language to describe erotic relations draws a line to the biblical notion of the marriage debt: “Let the husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband.”⁵⁰ According to this marital economy, each partner has the right at any time to demand sex of, and is likewise contracted to deliver sex to, his or her spouse. In describing himself a “debtor / For modesty,” Clare, whose biblical knowledge was extensive, contracts his readers in a similar erotic/economic arrangement. The significance of this rhetorical

maneuver, however, lies in the details of the marriage debt, which was an obligation mutually contracted. Organizing sexual activity between spouses, the marriage debt radically leveled traditional gender roles: "The wife hath not the power of her own body, but the husband. And in like manner the husband also hath not the power of his own body, but the wife."⁵¹ As we have seen, though, gender served as a cover for Clare's attacks on class structure. On this biblical authority, Clare rhetorically binds poet and public in a deliberately erotic economy that inherently collapses hierarchical class relations. His wish that "nought" remains between himself and the reader—a financial reckoning, a will to get naked, and, of course, the vagina—builds from the religious authority of the marriage debt to the classical and fiercely sexual nature of the Olympians. And the poem, which by traditional High-Romantic longing would aspire to transcend material conditions, collapses under the weight of consumer desire, crashing into the deliberate encounter between Vulcan and Venus, the erotic union of manufacture and desire.

The extraordinary elasticity of language, then, is a cover for the crude business of commodity exchange. The poet's linguistic exchanges are part of a broader commercial network that encompasses and is compassed by the poem:

Now i'n't this canto worth a single pound
 From anybody's pocket who will buy
 As thieves are worth a halter I'll be bound
 Now honest reader take the book & try
 & if as I have said it is not found
 I'll write a better canto bye & bye
 So reader now the money till unlock it
 & buy the book & help to fill my pocket.

(lines 295–302)

Despite his efforts to establish poetic independence, Clare remains "bound" like a thief: literally imprisoned in the High Beach Asylum; poetically bound by the interventions of his patrons and publishers; and, we might say, textually bound by the printed pages of his books. And, being figuratively bound in and by it, he wants his readers to buy it. These compressed layers cannot be separated, and Clare can only assume the persona of Byron to mediate his discontent.

Critics have been quick to dismiss "Don Juan" as a clumsy attempt at Byron's spry satirical style. Brewer finds the poem

“marred” by an “over-reliance on the Byronic style and tone,” while Mark Storey complains, “The humour is laboured and bitter: Clare lacks the necessary Byronic elegance.”⁵² I do not want to suggest that Clare’s handling of Byronic style is skillful, though I am less bothered by its shortcomings than others. Style, however, need not be the only standard by which we might judge the poem. Clare, I would contend, inhabited the Byronic persona to a more subtle effect than has been previously noted.

First and foremost, Clare was engaged in a stock trade. Imitations and continuations of Byron’s “Don Juan” were a fashionable practice—the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* records over twenty instances, from anonymous imitations looking to pass themselves off as Byron’s own to continuations such as Henry Morford’s *The Rest of Don Juan* (1846) and playful spinoffs such as G. R. Baxter’s *Don Juan Junior: A Poem by Byron’s Ghost* (1839).⁵³ The popularity of texts that so capitalized on Byron’s celebrity testifies to the ways in which authorship functions independent of the named writer. Romantic readers, it seems, were less concerned about authenticity than most of today’s critics, and we might compare the public’s taste for copies of visual arts—witness the popularity of printmakers such as William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson, or the mass-produced “luxury” goods such as Josiah Wedgwood’s “Queensware,” to their consumption of authors as commodities. A remaindered commodity himself in 1841, Clare appropriated the Byronic persona in order to express his sense of literary disenfranchisement.

V

Clare came to public prominence in what Leo Braudy has characterized as the “increasingly fame-choked world” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵⁴ The twinned phenomena of an expanding readership and the rise of mass media technologies, both of which reached unprecedented scale during the post-Revolutionary years, set the stage for this radical “democratization of fame.”⁵⁵ But at the same time that fame was becoming open to all, its very terms were being redefined. In recent years, literary critics and cultural historians have demonstrated how the “multitude of causes” so notoriously denounced by Wordsworth in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* reconfigured relations among writers, readers, and texts, drastically altering the form and function of authorship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵⁶ In what remains the only book-length

study of Romanticism and renown, Andrew Bennet argues that the sum effect of "[t]he technological and cultural transformations of the book trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century, then, may be understood to provide the context for the reinvention of posterity as the crucial determinant in Romantic conceptions of audience."⁵⁷ Bennet convincingly demonstrates how these material changes inflected Romantic poetry, giving rise to an avant-garde notion of the artist misunderstood in his day. But in identifying this culture of posterity as the defining trope of Romanticism, Bennet ignores a concomitant shift in the cultural function of authors and their work.

In tracing the rise of the aesthetic as a counterdiscourse to Enlightenment culture, Terry Eagleton observed what he called a "historical irony": "it is just when the artist is becoming debased to a petty commodity producer that he or she will lay claim to transcendent genius."⁵⁸ But in what is perhaps an even greater "historical irony," this Romantic cult of personality encouraged the very commoditization it was intended to resist, such that we might revise Eagleton's claim to read: "It is just when the artist is laying claim to transcendent genius that he or she is reduced to a *petty commodity*." For the fetish that the Romantics made of their unique subjectivity fueled the public's fascination with the private lives of authors, validating, as it were, a culture of celebrity in which the writer's person had become a symbolic asset, a mechanically reproducible representation circulated to a voracious public frequently more intimate with the writer's alleged private life than his or her work. As writers and critics struggled to define this new mode of "personal fame," as it was often called, celebrity began to define Romantic culture to itself.⁵⁹ While literary celebrities such as Laurence Sterne may have existed prior to the Romantic era, such stars were transitional figures, exceptions to the rule of "personality" that Romantic writers, readers, and critics would consolidate and bequeath to their Victorian successors.

The etymology of celebrity reflects this cultural shift in the terms of renown. Throughout the eighteenth century, celebrity, like fame, was a quality one might possess. By the middle of the nineteenth century, though, a celebrity became something you were, a personality.⁶⁰ The first documented use of this new sense appears in Dinah Mulock's 1849 novel, *The Ogilvies*. But for all the fascination Victorian Britain exhibited in celebrities, Mulock, I would argue, marks the tail end of a transformation in the social economy of reputation transacted during the revolutionary years of Romanticism.⁶¹ In the first edition of his *Dictionary* (1755),

Samuel Johnson defined celebrity as “Celebration; fame.” But by the fourth edition (1773), celebrity had come to signify “Publick and splendid transaction.”⁶² The *transactional* nature of celebrity points to the increasing commercialization of British society during the eighteenth century. More significantly, though, Johnson situates that transaction in the public sphere, foregrounding the sense of spectacle by which modern celebrity has come to be characterized. In so redefining the term, Johnson was looking to its Latin root, *celebritas*, which means both famous and thronged, shifting meaning toward the latter. “Throng” gestures toward the mass audience that would increasingly come to define both authorship and acclaim in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Clare never met Byron. But during his third visit to London, strolling up Oxford Street on 12 July 1824 to meet Eliza Emerson—who had flirtatiously asserted, “*two* poets only have my affections. Ld Byron and yourself”—he encountered a vast crowd in the streets.⁶³ Clare joined the throng in time to see a dark hearse roll past. At that very moment, “a young girl that stood beside me gave a deep sigh and utterd poor Lord Byron,” he recalled (*BH*, p. 157). In recording his impressions of Byron’s funeral, Clare takes the death of the age’s most celebrated literary personality as occasion to reflect on Byron’s notoriety, his critical reception, and his poetic achievement. Although his “funeral was blazed forth in the papers with the usual parade that accompany the death of great men . . . Byron stood in no need of news paper praise those little wirl puffs of praise” (*BH*, p. 156). In contrasting these two modes of tribute—the ephemeral “puffs” of newspaper praise and the embodied, affective sigh of a young girl—Clare turns this encounter with Byron to his own ends, shaping a moral by which he defines his own ambivalent relationship to publicity and the public: “I lookd up in the young girls face it was dark and beautiful and I coud almost feel in love with her for the sigh she had utterd for the poet it was worth all the News paper puffs and Magazine Mournings that ever was paraded after the death of a poet since flattery and hypocr[is]y was babtizd in the name of truth and sincerity” (*BH*, p. 157). Clare’s dismissal of “News paper puffs” echoes the critiques of cultural critics such as William Hazlitt, who likewise divorced true fame from the contemporary press: “popularity, a newspaper puff, cannot have the certainty of lasting fame.”⁶⁴ For Hazlitt and his peers, the press stood in a metonymical relationship to an audience of readers in which they had little faith, a mass public incapable of recognizing the

true genius of writers such as Wordsworth. "It may be objected," Hazlitt asserted, "that the public taste is capable of gradual improvement, because, in the end, the public do justice to works of the greatest merit. This is a mistake. The reputation ultimately, and often slowly affixed to works of genius is stamped upon them by authority, not by popular consent or the common sense of the world."⁶⁵ While deferring to a future audience the right to bestow the laurels of fame, Hazlitt nevertheless retained the cultural authority of critics. Clare, however, inverted this pecking order, associating the press with an aesthetic *haute monde* intent on maintaining cultural and political authority.

Against this patriciate Clare set the "straggling gropes of the common people," which lined the funeral route (*BH*, p. 156). The physical presence of these laborers stands in stark contrast to the wholly symbolic representation of the "higher orders," who behind closed windows "wore smiles on their faces and thought more of the spectacle than [*sic*] the poet" (*BH*, pp. 157–8). Of the sixty carriages involved in the demonstration, "the gilt ones that lede the procession were empty" (*BH*, p. 158). While such practice was customary, Clare appropriates the *pro forma* act to mark the elite as a mandarin set who occupy a symbolic order of representation that denies the materiality of lived experience. Empty carriages signify; they do not feel.

"[T]he common people," though, "*felt* his [Byron's] merits and his power and the common people of a country are the best *feelings* of a prophecy of futurity" (*BH*, p. 157, emphasis added). Clare mediates his contemporary neglect by reallocating aesthetic judgment to the "common people," who affectively embody the future. But he takes Wordsworth's appeal to posterity to a more radical end, ascribing a prophetic power to the common folk that Wordsworth had reserved for poets. Clare figures this capacity in a metaphor of bodily power. Resisting the impulse toward abstraction or transcendence, Clare argues for an aesthetics of felt response, an aesthetics tuned to England's workers, who, as physical laborers, were reminded constantly of the material conditions of existence: "[B]elow the prejudices and flatterys the fancys of likes and dislikes of fashion—they are the feelings of natures sympathies unadulterated with the pretensions of art and pride they are the veins and artery that feed and quicken the heart of living fame the breathings of eternity and the soul of time are indicated in that prophecy" (*BH*, p. 157). In a decidedly anatomical description, Clare embodies fame, which lives through a working class that unites present and future, material and ideal.

This metaphor of bodily power stands in stark contrast to the spectacle of grief. The laborers “did not stand gaping with surprise on the trappings of gaudy show or look on with apathised indifference like the hir[e]d mutes in the spectacle but *they felt it*,” Clare recalled (*BH*, p. 157, emphasis added). True feeling is marked on the bodies of the mourners: “I could see it in their faces . . . they felt by a natural impulse that the mighty was fallen and they mourned in saddend silence” (*BH*, p. 157). This “saddend silence” distinguishes itself from the “apathised indifference” of the hired mutes by means of emotion. Feeling displaces language. But we never learn how Clare feels, and his position as acute observer of this performance leaves his own position unresolved. The point is clear, however: “it is better to be beloved by the low and humble for undisguisd honesty then [*sic*] flattered by the great for purchasd and pensiond hypocrisy were excuses to win favours are smmuggeld on the public under the disguise of a pretended indifference about it” (*BH*, p. 158). Byron’s funeral was a stage on which Clare played out the drama of his celebrity and, ultimately, his critical heritage.

As he struggled to come to terms with his celebrity status, to reconcile private experience and public exposure, Clare explored the vexed relationship between writing and agency that so occupied his contemporaries. In writing as Byron, though, Clare provides a striking example of the diverse ways in which a burgeoning culture of celebrity pervaded and inflected the literary discourse we have come to call Romanticism. For Clare, celebrity was a *pharmakon*, both poison and cure: He countered his own celebrification through the phenomenon of Byronism. Clare’s case, thus, also suggests how we might begin to think of Romantic authors as not merely writers but also as powerful cultural fields through which individuals and communities looked to contest and consolidate the dramatic cultural changes with which they were faced.

Unlike Byron, who continued publishing cantos of his “Don Juan” until he died, Clare inaugurated an unsustainable textual erotics. Caught in the loop of celebrity, his “Don Juan” returns, in the end, to a demand for money: “So reader now the money till unlock it / & buy the book & help to fill my pocket” (lines 301–2). What Clare effects here is a provocative yet ultimately futile critique of both the high Romantic idealism and the capitalist energies that had so celebrated and then so efficiently dispossessed him. As “Don Juan” implies, the poet is no better than a prostitute, selling himself to satisfy a vulgar consumer demand.

This promiscuous encounter with an anonymous reading public proved infectious for Clare. Like a syphilitic infection, it drove him mad.

NOTES

¹ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron: With His Letters and Journals, and His Life by Thomas Moore*, ed. Henry Richard Stoddard, 16 vols. (Boston: Francis A. Nicolls, 1900), 13:57.

² John Clare, "Child Harold," in *The Later Poems of John Clare: 1837–1864*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 1:40–88, lines 426–7. Subsequent references to this poem are from this edition and volume and will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

³ Obituary of Clare, *Times* [London], 17 June 1840, p. 5.

⁴ Matthew Allen, "To The Editor of The Times," *Times* [London], 23 June 1840, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Byron, "Don Juan," in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1980–93, 1986), 5:483, canto XI, line 473. Byron was riffing on the myth, perpetuated by Percy Shelley, that John Keats's fatal consumption was sparked by John Wilson Croker's savage review in the *Quarterly Review* 19 (1818): 204–8. Byron's stanza somewhat unsympathetically concludes:

Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate:—

'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,

Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article.

(canto XI, lines 478–80)

⁸ Allen, p. 5.

⁹ Clare, *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 215. Following the lead of most of Clare's contemporary editors, throughout this essay I have maintained the poet's idiosyncratic spelling and syntax.

¹⁰ I have for the purposes of this introduction treated Allen's narrative as transparent. It is, of course, another motivated image of the poet. By publicly linking his "product"—the High Beach Asylum—with the public figure of Clare, Allen garners himself some valuable publicity. The commercial disputes among rival booksellers and patrons that marked Clare's early career are summarized in Storey's introduction to *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Storey, Critical Heritage (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), pp. 2–8. Subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CH* by page number. See also Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), especially pp. 110–72. Details of Clare's working relationship with his publisher, John Taylor, of the London firm Taylor and Hessey, can be found in Robinson's edition of the poems and James C. McKusick, "John Clare and the Tyranny of Grammar," *SIR* 33, 2 (Summer 1994): 255–77. Both view Clare as the victim of his unscrupulous

publisher. This informs Robinson's editorial choices in the Oxford edition of Clare's work. Robinson presents all of Clare's poems in their raw, manuscript state. The case for a more collaborative working relationship between Clare and Taylor is made in Tim Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London and Boston: Routledge, 1972), and Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 206–61.

¹¹ Clare drafted "Don Juan" at the High Beach Asylum and produced a fair copy (NMS 6) between July and December 1841 while home in Northborough. It was never published in Clare's lifetime. Subsequent references to this poem are from *Later Poems* and will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

¹² Philip W. Martin, "Authorial Identity and the Critical Act: John Clare and Lord Byron," in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 71–91, 71. Identifying a Romantic self-fashioning imbricated in "critical interpellation," Martin argues that "Clare's neglected poems *Child Harold* and *Don Juan* have their determinants . . . in his anxiety about critical reception" (p. 75). For Martin, "this critical bid to construct author identities . . . is tied up with the question of politics" (p. 74). My essay builds from Martin's insight to suggest how the gender politics of "Don Juan" function as a response to the alienating condition of literary celebrity.

¹³ William D. Brewer, "John Clare and Lord Byron," *JCSJ* 11 (1992): 43–56, 54.

¹⁴ Lynn Pearce, "John Clare's *Child Harold*: The Road Not Taken," in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Sellers, *Theory/Culture* 8 (Toronto and Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 143–56, 143, 147.

¹⁵ Bate summarizes critical consensus when he notes, "Episodic hallucinations and delusions of the kind experienced by Clare in his later years are perfectly consistent with the view that his condition was what we now call manic depression of increasingly severe, and ultimately psychotic, magnitude" (pp. 518–9). The best examination of Clare's madness remains Evan Blackmore's "John Clare's Psychiatric Disorder and Its Influence on His Poetry," *VP* 24, 3 (Autumn 1986): 209–28. Blackmore states: "A bipolar disorder is a syndrome rather than a disease; it is a pattern of behavior which can be triggered by a variety of factors" (p. 216). One of my goals in this essay is to identify, in Clare's literary work, some of the sociohistorical "factors" that contributed to his disorder.

¹⁶ John Clare, "The Courtship," in *Later Poems*, pp. 31–2, 33, lines 23–4.

¹⁷ Clare, "The Courtship," lines 29–32.

¹⁸ Laura Mandell, *Misogynous Economies: The Business of Literature in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 1. Mandell goes on to say: "misogyny is the terrain upon which the proponents of new kinds of business, profiteering, and commodification, meet their antagonists, proponents of the old, precapitalist order. My book traces the emergence of modern conceptions of business and literature . . . analyzing how misogyny is used to work through, realize, resist, and critique new capitalist forms" (p. 3). My reading of Clare is indebted to Mandell's formative insights.

¹⁹ Marlon B. Ross, "Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis of Poetic Identity," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 26–51, 29, 34. Ross's argument is further elaborated in his *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).

²⁰ Stuart Curran, "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Mellor, pp. 185–207, and "Women Readers, Women Writers," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Curran, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993): 177–95; Paula R. Feldman, ed., *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997); and Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

²¹ Other prominent and successful women writing during the Romantic period included Anna Barbauld, Hannah More, Anna Seward, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Robinson, Mary Tighe, Lucy Aiken, Joanna Baillie, Mary Betham, Margaret Hodson, Mary Russell Mitford, Amelia Opie, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Caroline Bowles Southey, and Jane West. See Curran, "Romantic Poetry," pp. 187–9; and Ross, *Contours*, pp. 190–3.

²² Clare to George Darley, Helpston, 3 September 1827, in *Letters*, pp. 396–8, 397. Another of Taylor's poets, John Keats, similarly disparaged women in a letter to Taylor: "I feel every confidence that if I choose I may be a popular writer; that I will never be; but for all that I will get a livelihood—I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman—they are both a cloying treacle to the wings of independence." Keats to Taylor, Winchester, 23 August 1819, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), 2:144.

²³ On the rise of literary reviews and how they influenced reception, see Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Marilyn Butler, "Culture's Medium: The Role of the Review," in *Companion*, ed. Curran, pp. 120–47; and Kathryn Sutherland, "Events . . . Have Made Us a World of Readers: Reader Relations 1780–1830," in *The Romantic Period*, ed. David B. Pirie, Penguin History of Literature 5 (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1994): pp. 1–48.

²⁴ Clare to James Augustus Hessey, 10 July 1820, in *Letters*, pp. 83–5, 83–4.

²⁵ Letitia Landon, likewise, felt the sharp edge of this class-based double standard: "It is only because I am poor, unprotected, and dependant [sic] on popularity, that I am a mark for all the gratuitous insolence and malice of idleness and ill-nature. And I cannot but feel deeply that had I been possessed of rank and opulence, either of these remarks had never been made, or if they had, how trivial would their consequences have been to me" (qtd. in Laman Blanchard, *Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1841], 1:54). Landon's letter points to the material consequences she suffered as a result of the innuendo and gossip that had linked her sexually with men such as Edward Bulwer Lytton, William Jerdan, and William Maginn.

²⁶ Clare to Hessey, 10 July 1820, in *Letters*, pp. 83–5, 84.

²⁷ Clare was an astute reader of the desires and interests of others. Concerned about how he was to pay homage to the diversity of individu-

als who had worked on his behalf and who expected public recognition, Clare composed the poem "To an early Friend" of which he had to say: "As I hate partiality I shall never give this 'early friend' a name but let it remain a shadow while the person addressd & the readers (if its worth any) take what liberty they please & if they like each think them selves worthy of the character & every one who has any claim on the authors gractitude take it to themselves" (*Letters*, p. 272).

²⁸ Mandell, p. 7.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), p. 13.

³⁰ Kristeva, p. 102. Abjection is the psychic mechanism that underlies Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, during which the child accedes to a social-symbolic realm by suppressing the disorderly experience of body and drive in favor of an ideal, unified image of itself. But we should not confuse it with Lacan's developmental theory. Abjection precedes and paves the way for the child's accession to language and social identity.

³¹ Clare admitted a proclivity for women and drink—" [T]emptations were things that I rarely resisted," Clare maintained, recalling that he frequented "bad houses, those painted pills of poison . . . here not only my health but my life has often been on the eve of its sacrafice by an illness too well known, and to[o] disgusting to mention." However, his editors and patrons looked to present him as an exemplar of rural virtue (Eric Robinson and David Powell, eds. *John Clare by Himself* [Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996], p. 29). Subsequent references to this volume will be cited in the text, by page number, as *BH*.

³² On the demographics of nineteenth-century prostitution, see Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730–1830*, Women and Men in History (London and New York: Longman, 1999). Henderson notes that "immigrant prostitutes made up over sixty percent of the entire group [of prostitutes arrested in Southwark from 1814–1829]" (p. 19).

³³ Robert Gould, *Satirical Epistle to the Female Author of a Poem Called "Sylvia's Revenge"* (1691), quoted in Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), pp. 22–3.

³⁴ See especially Gallagher's introduction and first chapter to *Nobody's Story*, "Who Was That Masked Woman?: The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Work of Aphra Behn," pp. 1–48.

³⁵ Henderson, p. 176.

³⁶ Criminal conversation was a civil action whereby the husband of an adulterous wife could sue his wife's sexual partner for damages.

³⁷ The word is Kristeva's: "A language now manifests itself whose *complaint* repudiates the common code, then builds into an *idolect*, and finally resolves itself through the sudden irruption of *affect*" (p. 53).

³⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:118, 124.

³⁹ Clare to Taylor, London, 21 February 1822, in *Letters*, pp. 231–3, 231.

⁴⁰The libidinous connotations are reinforced by *strum*, which as a noun was shorthand for strumpet.

⁴¹Byron, qtd. in Brewer, p. 47.

⁴²Clare to Eliza Phillips, May 1841, in *Letters*, pp. 647–8, 648.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Clare became interested in boxing during his third visit to London in 1824: "I caught the mania so much from Rip for such things that I soon became far more eager for the fancy than himself and I watch'd the appearance of every new Hero on the stage with as eager curiosity to see what sort of fellow he was as I had before done the Poets" (*BH*, p. 153).

⁴⁵Clare, qtd. in J. W. Tibble and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: A Life*, rev. ed. (London: Michael Joseph, 1932; rpt. 1972), p. 373.

⁴⁶While we are unlikely ever to know whether this identity swapping was deliberate or delusional (I tend to think there is a little of both involved), it reveals certain psychic strains that dominated Clare's imaginative life in the asylum. William Jerom, an inmate at High Beach, recalled how "Clare had a great knack of personating those in whom he was particularly interested. He almost considered himself to represent the idiosyncrasy of them of whom he spake, as I was Lord Byron, or I was the Marquis of Exeter, &c." (qtd. in A Correspondent, "Poet in Bondage: A Picture of John Clare," *TLS*, 27 December 1941, p. 657). This pastime proved, according to Jerom, "a very happy art in charming the woebegone moments [of life in the asylum] away" (p. 657). On such evidence, Roger Sales argues, "Clare [was] contesting the restraints and constraints of Victorian asylum culture by playing a medley of specifically Regency characters including sometimes himself" (*John Clare: A Literary Life*, Literary Lives [Basingstoke, Hampshire UK, and New York: Palgrave, 2002], p. 144). I find Sales's point provocative if ultimately unpersuasive. At what point does fantasy bleed over into delusion? What is significant is the event itself. Intentionally or not, Clare incorporated these figures into his consciousness, "performing" them as points of resistance.

⁴⁷Clare began reading Byron's "Don Juan" on 17 September 1824, having acquired a copy from his friend Joseph Henderson. By 18 October he was recording acute criticisms of the English cantos. See *BH*, pp. 174–5 and 187.

⁴⁸I have found Margaret Russett and Philip W. Martin to be most useful in thinking about Clare's relationship to Byron. See Russett, "Like 'Wedding Gowns or Money from the Mint': Clare's Borrowed Inheritance," *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, Romanticism and the Law (March 1999), <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/law/russett/mruss.htm>. Russett maintains that Clare's poem "indicates a shrewd perception of how, in the phenomenon of Byronism, the extremes of aristocratic and popular traditions meet" (par. 8). On Clare's use of "the Byronic form to dramatize the limits of his own poetic persona" (par. 8), see also Edward Strickland, "Boxer Byron: A Clare Obsession," *ByronJ* 17 (1989): 57–76; Brewer; and Storey, *The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), pp. 152–73.

⁴⁹Clare's celebrity status left him particularly attuned to the gap between representation and material reality. In identifying consumption as the key factor of this emerging economic order transacted through signs, "Don Juan" anticipates in many ways the critiques of mass media society that cultural critics from Leo Boorstin and Guy DeBord to Jean Baudrillard link to late twentieth-century culture. "It is this generalised *substitution of the code for*

the reference," Baudrillard writes, "that defines mass media consumption" ("Mass Media Culture," in *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object Destiny, 1968–1983*, ed. and trans. Paul Foss and Julian Pe-fanis [London and Concord MA: Pluto Press, 1990], pp. 63–97, 92). But as Clare's situation, and that of numerous others such as Byron, James Hogg, Landon, George IV, Queen Caroline, or Beau Brummel, makes clear, a society of spectacle had, a century earlier, begun to organize social life.

⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 7:3. I want to thank Cristina Cervone for bringing this sense of "debt" to my attention.

⁵¹ 1 Cor. 7:4.

⁵² Brewer, p. 52; Storey, *Poetry*, p. 155.

⁵³ *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. Joanne Shattock, vol. 3: 1800–1900, 3d edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 264–5.

⁵⁴ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. 425.

⁵⁵ Braudy, p. 313.

⁵⁶ Such changes include but can not be limited to the development of copyright law (see Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993]); the democratic energies unleashed by the French Revolution (see Klancher; Sutherland; and Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* [New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982]); technological advances that enabled the industrialization of publishing (see Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996]; and Sutherland); the rise of periodicals and a new literary professional class of reviewers (see Butler; Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* [New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000]; and Klancher); the spread of literacy and the expansion of once-stable coterie audiences of the eighteenth century into a heterogeneous, mass audience (see Klancher; Sutherland; and Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* [Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957]); the emergence of biography as narrative act and critical principal (see Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1990]); and the shift from mercantile to industrial capitalism (see Mandell).

⁵⁷ Andrew Bennet, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 22. Less directly concerned with fame, Newlyn discusses the ways in which Romantic writers and critics responded to the vexing issue of audience. While my argument is indebted to those of Newlyn and Bennet, neither of these provocative discussions of reader-writer relations account for the complex and multilayered phenomenon of celebrity and its ideological function in a culture increasingly driven by calls for democracy, the spread of capitalism, and the not-unrelated rise of what critics of the age called "personality."

⁵⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 65.

⁵⁹ A brief keyword search of *The Times* demonstrates the increasing cultural relevance of celebrity. From 1805 to 1815 the word appeared 195 times. From 1815 to 1825, that figure rose 367 percent to 715. From 1785 to 1845, "celebrity" usage increases at a rate far exceeding that of "fame."

⁶⁰ "A person of celebrity; a celebrated person: a public character" (OED, 2d edn., s.v. "celebrity," 4).

⁶¹ Similarly, celebrity would become the negative counterpart of fame. In 1863, Matthew Arnold could make the distinction: "They [Spinoza's successors] had celebrity, Spinoza has fame" (OED, 2d edn., s.v. "celebrity," 3). As celebrity localized itself in individuals, it also became fame's somewhat scandalous down-at-the-heels cousin.

⁶² All references to the *Dictionary* are from Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language on CD-ROM*, ed. Anne McDermott (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

⁶³ Qtd. in Sales, p. 184n17.

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Newlyn, p. 283.

⁶⁵ Qtd. in Newlyn, pp. 280–1.