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## **Exploding Magazines: Byron's *The Siege of Corinth*, Francesco Morosini and the Destruction of the Parthenon**

David Roessel

### **Abstract**

This paper links several threads connected to Byron's least regarded Turkish Tale. Why, when the English Parliament decided in June 1816 to purchase the Elgin Marbles for the British Museum, did Byron appear to be silent on a subject that he had expressed strong feelings about some years earlier? Why, when he attacked Lord Elgin on the Parthenon marbles, did he not link him in infamy with Francesco Morosini, who had fired the shot that blew up the Parthenon? And why, in *The Siege of Corinth*, did Byron intentionally depart from the account in his historical source? My paper argues that *The Siege of Corinth*, one of his Turkish Tales that includes a conflict between Venetians and Turks, a siege, and an explosion, contains within it Byron's reflections on these issues. *The Siege of Corinth*, in short, has more layers than have previously been explored.

On June 15, 1815, the English Parliament had its first debate on the subject of purchasing the Parthenon marbles from Lord Elgin. The matter was not concluded, in part because, with the armies on the way to Waterloo, there were more pressing concerns, and also because members felt that the question "should be deferred until the next session so that Lord Elgin's right to the collection could be fully investigated" (St. Clair 220). The proposal was reintroduced on February 23, 1816, which led to the formation of a Select Committee tasked to investigate and report to the full body. Parliament voted on the committee's recommendation to purchase the marbles for the British Museum on June 9, 1816, and the sale was completed in July.<sup>1</sup>

Among the public comments on the purchase and display of the marbles by the British Museum was the poem *Modern Greece and the Elgin Marbles* (1817; later entitled simply *Modern Greece*) by the poet Felicia Hemans, who, supportive of the acquisitions of the marbles, wrote:

And who may grieve that, rescued from these [Turkish] hands,  
Spoilers of excellence and foes to art,  
Thy relics, Athens, borne to other lands,  
Claim homage still to thee from every heart? (871-74)

Susan Wolfson has suggested that Hemans “entered the Elgin marbles debate to contest the view advanced in *Childe Harold II*” (160). Byron had been one of Elgin’s most vociferous challengers from 1811 to 1812, the period when Elgin had first tried to sell the marbles to the English Government.<sup>2</sup> As William St. Clair observed, “*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *The Curse of Minerva* coloured the world’s view of Lord Elgin’s activities,” and had made the marbles “a symbol, of Greece’s ignominious slavery, of Europe’s failure to help her, and of Britain’s overweening pride” (197, 184). Yet, as Elgin continued his efforts to interest the government in the marbles between 1814 and 1816, Byron appears to have been curiously silent.<sup>3</sup> This reticence seems even more curious when Byron had disparaged this very outcome in *The Curse of Minerva*, where he had said that Elgin’s aim was: “To sell, and make, may Shame record the day,/ The State receiver of his pilfer’d prey” (173-74). Byron did not leave England for the continent until late April, 1816, and was in London when the Select Committee held two weeks of hearings on the issue starting on February 29. The poet knew some of the people who offered public comment or who had been called as witnesses. For example, as Benita Eisler has remarked, the Classics professor John Nicholas Fazakerly, whom Byron had met in Athens in 1810, “testified to the government’s Select Committee as to the dangers of allowing any great works of antiquity to remain in Greece” (269). Nor, one would think, would Byron have been unaware that the 1815 edition of the *Memorandum on the Subject of the Earl of Elgin’s Pursuits in Greece*, the pamphlet of self-justification that Elgin himself had first printed in 1810, appeared from Byron’s own publisher, John Murray.

Byron’s silence was certainly not because he changed his mind about Elgin and the Parthenon marbles, for in 1821 he declared that “I opposed, and ever will oppose—the robbery of ruins—from Athens to instruct the English in Sculpture (who are as capable of Sculpture—as the Egyptians are of skating) but why do I do

so?—The ruins are as poetical in Piccadilly as they were on the Parthenon—but the Parthenon and its rock are less so without them” (*Complete Miscellaneous Prose* 133). But given how publicly he had challenged Elgin just a few years before, and that he had, to use St. Clair’s words, “coloured the world’s view of Lord Elgin activities” (197), it is a bit surprising that this new development did not cause him to think again about the fate of the marbles and the claims that Elgin and his supporters were offering. So it is intriguing that, during this period, Byron was working on *The Siege of Corinth*, one of his Turkish Tales that includes a conflict between Venetians and Turks, a siege, and an explosion.<sup>4</sup> Since these elements had all played a prominent role in one of the most important episodes in the history of the Parthenon marbles, it is rather difficult to think that this was completely coincidental. Indeed, Byron published *The Siege of Corinth*, together with *Parisina*, in February, 1816, the same month that Parliament voted to set up the Select Committee to determine the fate of the Elgin marbles. I am not arguing that a connection to the sale of the marbles is the only way to read the poem, or that it supersedes or carries more weight than other readings of the poem, and certainly not that the poem was written simply to contest the sale of the marbles. But I do think that Byron was aware of the continuing debate about the Elgin marbles after 1812, and the ways in which he altered the historical record in the poem allowed him to comment on the claims of the supporters of Elgin that the marbles were better off in England.<sup>5</sup>

*The Siege of Corinth* presents the reader with a curious paradox. It is, as Daniel Watkins noted, unique among Byron’s Eastern Tales in using a “specific historical groundwork” for the setting (108). This historical groundwork is offered in the “Advertisement,” which provides an account of Ottoman siege of Corinth in 1715 from the continuation of Knolles’s famous *History of the Turks*:

The grand army of the Turks (in 1715), under the Prime Vizier, to open themselves a way into the heart of the Morea, and to form the siege of Napoli di Romania, the most considerable place in all that country, thought it best to attack Corinth, upon which they made several storms. The garrison being weakened, and the governor seeing it was impossible to hold out against so mighty a force, thought fit to beat a parley: but while they were treating the articles, one of the magazines in the Turkish camp, wherein they had six hundred barrels of powder, blew up by accident, whereby six or seven hundred men were killed: which so enraged the infidels that they would not grant any capitulation, but stormed the place with so much fury, that they took, and put most of the garrison, with Signor Minotti, the governor, to the sword. The rest, with Antonio Bembo, proveditor extraordinary, were made prisoners of war. (*Complete Poetical Works* III.322)

Watkins suggested that Byron might have chosen this historical incident for the setting of the poem “because of its obscurity; because the episode was little known to the English reading public, there would be little chance to be challenged by the critics on historical accuracy” (109). But any reader of both the “Advertisement” and the poem would be able to charge the poet with historical inaccuracy, since the details of the end of the siege in the poem clearly depart from his historical source. In Byron’s new version, the Venetian commander Minotti, as he is overwhelmed by the Ottoman assault, retires to a church used as a magazine and blows himself up with as many Turks as possible, making what was unintentional in the historical account both intentional and heroic in the poem. By placing the “Advertisement” at the beginning of the poem, Byron calls particular attention to the fact that his poem does *not* follow his source. Certainly poets have license to alter historical details in narrative poems, but the reversal of the central event in such a dramatic way deserves some investigation.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the factual discrepancy between the Advertisement and the poem, *The Siege of Corinth*, unlike the other Eastern tales, “abounds with the names of historical places and people” (MacColl 239). Many of those names and places, apart from those taken from antiquity, are contained in two stanzas that refer to the events before or after the siege of 1715. Stanza 9 looks back to the conflict in which the Venetians had conquered Corinth, the Morea, and Athens in the campaign of 1686/1687. The Venetian commander defending Corinth in 1715 was:

Sent by the state to guard the land,  
(Which wrested from the Moslem’s hand,  
While Sobieski tamed his pride  
By Buda’s wall and Danube’s side,  
The chiefs of Venice wrung away  
From Patra to Euboea’s bay).  
Minotti held in Corinth’s towers  
The Doge’s delegated powers,  
While yet the pitying eye of Peace  
Smiled o’er her long forgotten Greece:  
And ere that faithless truce was broke  
Which freed her from the unchristian yoke. (167-78)

The mention of John Sobieski evokes the Siege of Vienna in 1683, in which Sobieski and the Polish army were a key element in the Ottoman defeat. In the years following, the Austrians pushed down the Danube, eventually retaking Buda and most of Hungary from the Turks. The siege of Vienna was, from that time on, viewed as a turning point between East and West; momentum had now shifted to the Christian

states and the so-called Terrible Turk was on the defensive. The conquest of the Morea by the Turks in 1715 was something of an anomaly within the larger historical picture provided in the poem, situated between much more significant Turkish defeats—at Vienna in 1683, and at 1716 at Petrovaradin, or Peterwaradin, which took place on the plain of Carlowitz. The conqueror of Corinth, Byron's Coumourgi, was defeated and killed by the Austrians under Prince Eugene. Byron references this in Canto 5:

Coumourgi—he whose closing scene  
Adorned the triumph of Eugene  
When on Carlowitz's bloody plain,  
The last and mightiest of the slain,  
He sank, regretting not to die  
But cursed the Christian's victory—  
Coumourgi—can his glory cease,  
That latest conqueror of Greece,  
Till Christian hands again restore  
The freedom Venice gave of yore?  
A hundred years have rolled away,  
Since he refixed the Moslem's sway; (96-107)

The Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718 allowed each side to keep what it had gained, over Venetian objections. Venice had hoped to regain the Morea, lost just three years before, and had its eye on Crete. But Austria, which had made the greatest gains and now held Belgrade, had to confront a threat from France and made the Venetians accept the terms. If one reads the line "The Freedom Venice gave of yore" as anything but ironic, the outcome, to use St. Clair's words about the Elgin marbles, could be seen as a sign "of Greece's ignominious slavery" and "of Europe's failure to help her" (184).

One name that should stand beside those of Sobieski and Prince Eugene is conspicuously absent. George Finlay wrote in his *History of Greece* (published well after Byron's death) that the Venetian campaign of 1686/87 war "was the most successful the republic ever carried on against the Ottoman empire" and that "the glory acquired by Venice, and the conquests she gained, must be ascribed entirely to one great man," Francesco Morosini (v. 172, 173). W. Carew Hazlitt in his *The Venetian Republic* said the campaign in Greece was "peculiarly identified with the name and genius of Morosini" (ii. 249). The Venetians honoured Morosini with a bust in the hall of the Council of Ten along with the inscription "Francisco Mauroceni Peloponnesiaco adhuc viventi senatus" and elected him as doge when Marcantonio Giustiniani died in early 1688. It seems a bit odd, then, in a poem

where Sobieski, Eugene, Coumourgi, and the treaty of Carlowitz are mentioned that the name of Morosini, whom Finlay stated occupied “so conspicuous a place in the history of Greece and Venice” (v.173), has no place. The poem simply states that: “the chiefs of Venice wrung away/ From Patra to Euboea’s bay.” Byron’s literate audience might not have known much about the siege of Corinth in 1715, but they would have known that Francesco Morosini had conquered the Morea for Venice in 1686/87, just as they would have known Sobieski’s role in the siege of Vienna.

Morosini was a figure who, one imagines, would have been of interest to Byron. He spent over twenty years fighting the Ottomans in Crete and the Aegean. He was the last captain at Candia in Crete, a city called “Troy’s rival” in *Childe Harold 4* (124), and surrendered to the Turks in 1669. Upon his return, Morosini was brought up on charges of exceeding his authority in making terms with the enemy, as well as cowardice, treason, and corruption. He stayed in Venice to defend himself, and won an overwhelming vote of acquittal in the Grand Council. “He emerged from the affair without a stain on his honour,” and when the war began in 1684, the Venetians turned to the 66 year old Morosini again (Norwich 558). In 1688, after he was elected doge, he went to Greece one last time to lead the Venetian forces, and died there in 1694. The tale of how the virtuous Morosini overcame his opponents and detractors forms a nice counterpoint to the renegade Alp in *The Siege of Corinth*, who flees Venice when accusations are made against him (84-91). Indeed, since Morosini’s history was so connected to a siege between Turks and Venetians on Greek soil, once again it seems too coincidental that Byron’s leading character in *The Siege of Corinth* functions as the reverse, negative, image of Morosini.

But Morosini had captured Athens for Venice in 1687, and that part of the story had become infamous rather than famous. The same *History of the Turks*, from which Byron took his advertisement for the poem, recounted the capture of Athens as follows: “Now the garrison finding the besiegers ply them with bombs, they made a Magazine of [the Parthenon], and deposited their ammunition therein; but a bomb falling on the roof, and breaking thro, set the powder on fire, demolished part of the stately building and killed 200” (271). After capturing Athens, Morosini wanted, according to William Miller, to send to Venice

some memorial of Athens that could vie with the four bronze horses taken thither after the capture of Constantinople. He ordered the removal from the western pediment of the Parthenon the statue of Poseidon (which Morosini thought to be

Zeus) and the chariot of victory (whom the Venetians mistook for Athene); but the recent explosion had disarranged the blocks of marble so that the workmen no sooner touched them than these beautiful sculptures fell in pieces upon the ground. (412-13)

After his attempt to capture Negroponte (Chalcis) failed, Morosini withdrew the Venetians forces to the Morea and abandoned Athens to the Turks. Athens, unlike Corinth, was not under Venetian rule from 1687 to 1715.

Well over a century later, Byron and John Cam Hobhouse, his travelling companion in Greece, saw first-hand the damage caused by the explosion on the Parthenon. Hobhouse recorded in his journal that he was shown “a dent in the floor...as being occasioned by the shell which blew up the powder-magazine, and destroyed the roof of the temple, when bombarded by Morosini.” He also says that “The figure of Victory has been recovered by agents of Lord Elgin...underneath [a Turkish house] where it had lain since the Venetians had unsuccessfully tried to remove it in 1687. The ropes by which, under the direction of General Koenigsmark, the workmen were lowering them, broke, and many fine figures were dashed to pieces. Lord Elgin has reaped the advantage of the sacrilege of the Venetians” (282). Hobhouse stated that in 1667, “every antiquity of which there is now any trace in the Acropolis, was in a tolerable state of preservation” and “if the decay should continue as it has been for something like a century past, then there will, in a few years, be not one marble standing on another on the site of the Parthenon” (281). He concludes, “it was better the sculpture of the Parthenon be preserved in a museum in England, than ground to powder on their own bases” (287). Edward Dodwell, on the other hand, claimed that the “the magnificent monuments of the Athenian Acropolis suffered more” in a year of Elgin than “during the whole preceding century,” although he did admit that “the Venetians inflicted the first fatal blow upon the Parthenon, when they besieged Athens in 1687. Their artillery laid part of the inimitable structure in ruins. The labours of Ictinus, of Phidias, and of Kallikartes, were disregarded in the rage of war” (I.321).

Byron’s failure to mention Morosini in *The Siege of Corinth* is not as surprising as it may seem, for he fails to mention him elsewhere when we might expect him to appear. At the opening of Canto II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, are the lines: “Goddess of wisdom! Here thy temple was,/ And is, despite of fire” (3-4). A note for these lines reads, “Part of the Acropolis was destroyed by the explosion of a magazine during the Venetian siege” (CPW II. 282). In another note Byron wrote: “The Parthenon, before its destruction in part, by fire during the Venetian siege,



had been a temple, a church and a mosque. In each point of view it is an object of regard: it changed its worshippers, but still was a place thrice sacred to devotion: its violation is a triple sacrilege" (*CPW* II. 190). "The Venetian siege" seems a rather mild description of Morosini's activities in Athens, given that Byron had this to say about Elgin and his agents: "when they carry away three or four shiploads of most valuable and massy relics that time and barbarism have left to the most injured and celebrated of cities; when they destroy, in a vain attempt tear down, those works which have been the admiration of ages, I know of no motive which can excuse, no name which can designate, the perpetrators of such dastardly devastation" (*CPW* II. 191). In fact, Byron mentions Morosini by name only once, in the 1821 letter to John Murray concerning the dispute with William Lisle Bowles about the reputation and legacy of Alexander Pope. "We are asked, 'What makes the venerable towers of [Westminster] Abbey more poetical as objects than the tower for the manufacturing of patent shot surrounded by the same scenery. I will answer it—Architecture. Turn Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's into a powder magazine—their poetry as objects is the same—the Parthenon was actually converted into one during Morosini's Venetian siege—and part of it destroyed in consequence" (*Complete Miscellaneous Prose* 141). Here the Venetian siege becomes simply "Morosini's Venetian siege," but once again there is no condemnation of the consequences of that siege for the temple of Athena nor any hint of what Morosini had done when he had captured the Parthenon. By contrast, Byron repeatedly compares Elgin, to the detriment of the Scottish Lord, to the Gothic king Alaric and to the Turks, as in *The Curse of Minerva* (97): "Scaped from the ravage of the Turk and Goth/ Thy country sends a spoiler worse than both" (96-97).<sup>7</sup>

Byron was not the only one who failed to mention Morosini while castigating Elgin. Edward Dodwell in *A Classical and Topographic Tour Through Greece during the years 1801, 1805, and 1806* noted that "the trophies of human genius—having escaped the destructive frenzy of the Ikonoklasts, the rapacity of the Venetians, and the barbarous violence of the Mahomedans, have at last been doomed to experience the devastating outrage which will never cease to be deplored." A few lines later he acknowledged that "The Venetians who besieged the Acropolis and ruined the Parthenon, caused some statues to be detached from the pediment, but as the machinery was imperfect, those valuable remains fell to the ground and were irreparably damaged." Yet his final comment on Elgin refers to marbles "of which the temples have been sacrilegiously deprived" (322). Edward

Daniel Clarke, who also directed his fire at Elgin (while saying that his agent Lusieri, who hosted him in Athens, only acted with reluctance) said that worst damage to the Acropolis before Elgin could be attributed “not, as has been asserted, to the religious zeal of the early Christians, the barbarism of the Turks, or the explosions that took place when the temple was used as a powder magazine, but to the decomposition of the stone itself” (I.44). In his autobiography, John Galt remarked how “the rape of the temples by Lord Elgin was at that time the theme of every English tongue in Athens” (154).

One should note that, of the writers quoted above, the one who was most sympathetic to the argument that Elgin had saved the marbles from further destruction was Hobhouse, and he is the one who had the most to say about the damage caused by Morosini. Lady Elgin, in an 1805 letter that describes her husband’s activities on the Acropolis, wrote that “one of the bombs fired by Morosini from the opposite hill of the Museum injured the roof and many of the figures, and the attempt of General Koenigsmark to take down the sculpture of Minerva ruined the whole.” Lady Elgin goes on to say that by “purchasing the house of a Turkish janissary and tearing it down, Elgin’s agents were able to recover some of the fragmentary statues of the pediment” (quoted in Vrettos 118). Elgin himself in his *Memorandum on the Subject of the Earl of Elgin’s Pursuits in Greece* (1815), not surprisingly, made the same point about Morosini’s treatment of the Parthenon, observing that “one of the bombs fired by Morosini destroyed many of the figures,” while Morosini’s attempt to “take down the stature of Minerva, ruined the whole” (13). F. S. N. Douglas summed up Elgin’s arguments succinctly as follows: “the supineness and apathy of the Greeks themselves, in respect to the wonders they possess, and from the probability of their being destroyed by the Turks, or ultimately falling into the hands of our enemies” (note on 86). Elgin got a great deal of mileage from the assertion that, but for his actions, the marbles would have been taken to Paris. Douglas agreed that “their greatest danger was certainly from the French; but besides that such an argument is always bad, if the action itself is proved unjust, it does not appear that their intentions, however rapacious, would always have the power of being executed” (note on 87). Despite his disapproval of Elgin’s actions, Douglas chides Byron for stigmatizing “the error of a liberal mind as the crime of barbarians” (note on 89).

Within the context of the debate over Elgin’s removal of the marbles, and their sale to the British Government, the name of Morosini became a partisan word.

Elgin's side used it as a justification, and those opposed to Elgin avoided any mention of the Venetian commander. William Leake in his *Topography of Athens*, for example, spoke disparagingly of Morosini's "fatal expedition, no less destructive to the remains of Athenian art, than useless as a military expedition," adding that the injury that the marbles "received on that occasion was the cause of all the dilapidation which they have since suffered, and rendered the transportation of the fallen fragments out of Turkey their best preservation from total destruction" (85). Edward Daniel Clarke, on the other hand, argued that, due to Elgin's activities, "the form of the temple has sustained a greater injury than it had already experienced from the Venetian artillery" (I. 41).

It is interesting to note that Morosini's desire to remove the sculptures of the Parthenon was to rival the four bronze horses sent to Venice by Enrico Dandolo after the sack of Constantinople in 1204. In *Childe Harold* 4, Byron, looking at the sad fate of Venice as an Austrian province, proclaims:

Oh for one hour of blind old Dandolo!  
Th'octogenarian chief, Byzantium's conquering foe!  
Before St. Mark's still glow his steeds of bronze,  
Their collars gilded in the sun— (105-108)

Why, if Byron is against the cultural appropriation of statues, should he not curse Dandolo for removing the bronze horses (and one could add for much else besides)? Why is Byron so forthright that "thus may Lord Elgin boast of having ruined Athens" (*CPW* II. 190) when Morosini did as much, if not more, damage, and Dandolo pretty much wrecked a city and civilization? Byron never addresses this directly, but in *The Curse of Minerva* he says of Elgin's goal:

Long of their Patron's gusto let them tell  
Whose noblest, *native* gusto is to sell  
To sell, and make—may shame record the day!  
The state receive the pilfer'd prey. (171-74)

Motives, then, were a key factor differentiating Elgin and Morosini, even if the actions are the same. Edward Dodwell, comparing Elgin and the Turks, said that "The Turks did not ruin the buildings which were still standing, unless upon some urgent occasion—such as the reparation of the fort... Without wishing to palliate either Turks or British dilapidation, it must be recollected, that the former merely followed one of the *trinoda necessitas* of Roman law... When the Turks have destroyed any ancient remains, they have been impelled by some purpose of utility,

and not inspired by the ardor spoliandi” (I. 325). Byron went even further and suggested that Elgin was driven by a desire for profit (although Elgin never said this, nor did he make any money from selling the marbles to the state). Morosini, on the other hand, was out for glory, as well as offering “the Freedom Venice gave of yore”—a noble if hard to prove assertion.

Thomas Hughes, another of Elgin’s opponents, made the same point. “It is surprising, after all the spoliation to which the city has been exposed, that so much remains. Romans burn it, Goths sack it, Venetians bombard it, Turks ground down its monuments for mortar, and cold-blooded connoisseurs export them as articles of commerce” (I.261). The Romans, Goths, Venetians, and Turks, for all their faults, were at least hot-blooded creatures.

Byron, whether with historical accuracy or not, contrasted the servitude of the Greeks under the Turks with the freedom that they experienced between 1687 and 1715.<sup>8</sup> “Freedom” and Greece” are conflated in the poem, and Venice and Minotti are associated with them against Muslim oppression.

That land is glory’s still and theirs!  
‘Tis still a watchword on the earth.  
When a man will do a deed of worth,  
He points to Greece, and turns to tread,  
So sanctioned, on the tyrant’s head:  
He looks to her, and rushes on  
Where life is lost, or freedom won. (372-78)

Alp, the renegade understands this, for he knows he is involved in a “lawless siege,/ whose best success was sacrilege” (355-56). “Sacrilege” is a word that often appears in connection with Elgin. In *The Curse of Minerva*, the goddess vows of Elgin: “May hate pursue his sacrilegious lust” (200). Hobhouse, as noted above, has reported that “Elgin had reaped the advantage of the sacrilege of the Venetians” (282). Edward Dodwell also stated that “temples have been sacrilegiously deprived” by Elgin’s agents (I. 323).

There are other significant thematic and verbal echoes between *The Curse of Minerva* and *The Siege of Corinth*, which suggest that Byron had the earlier poem in his mind as he was working on *The Siege of Corinth*. In both poems, a young man goes to the ruins of an ancient temple where he has an encounter with an unworldly female. In *The Curse of Minerva*, the young man is Byron and the woman Athens. In *The Siege of Corinth*, Alp meets the ghostly Francesca, whom he once intended to marry. It may seem odd to compare the ancient goddess with a

devout Christian, who tries to persuade Alp to make the sign of the cross. But we must remember that Byron had noted that the Parthenon “had been a temple, a church and a mosque. In each point of view it is an object of regard: it changed its worshippers, but still was a place thrice sacred to devotion: its violation is a triple sacrilege” (CPW II. 90). Indeed, Hobhouse noted that, “the Panagia, or Holy Virgin, is the favourite of the Greeks, the Minerva of Modern Athens” (I. 431). This is not to suggest that Byron does not see differences between the religions, but that he also understands that in Greece and the East they have over centuries shared the same space. And in *The Curse of Minerva*, Athena declares, “See here what Elgin won, and what he lost! (118). The last line of *The Siege of Corinth* reads “Thus was Corinth lost and won” (1034). Indeed, he had used a version of the line earlier in the poem to point out this very moral, saying that when a man wants to do a deed of worth, “He looks to her [Greece], and rushes on/ Where life is lost, or freedom won (377-78). This phrase is eerily similar to the Greek battle-cry that would resonate during the Greek War of Independence and beyond, “Freedom or Death.” It is quite possible that Byron had heard it spoken by some of the Greeks he met during his travels in 1809-1811.

And then there is the issue of the jackal in Greece. At the end of *The Siege of Corinth*, there are lines about how various animals reacted to the Minotti’s explosion. Among them is a “jackal’s troop, in gathered cry” (1024). In a note to this line, Byron said: “I believe I have taken a poetic license to transplant the jackal from Asia. In Greece, I never saw or heard these animals; but among the ruins of Ephesus I have heard them by hundreds. They haunt ruins, and follow armies” (CPW III. 487). Byron never saw jackals by the hundred in Ephesus, as Peter Cochran has shown. But Byron had seen a jackal’s troop in Greece, one that haunted ruins. In *The Curse of Minerva*, the goddess proclaims:

The Gothic monarch and the Pictish peer:  
Arms gave the first his right, the last had none,  
But basely stole what less barbarians won.  
So when the lion quits his fell repast  
Next prowls the wolf, the filthy jackal last; (110-14)

Here there is no question that the jackal in Greece is Elgin, and if Byron has not transplanted the jackal from Asia Minor as he claimed, he has transplanted it from his earlier poem.

Byron points us towards Athens in the poem's first stanza. The poem appears to start with a panorama from Acrocorinth, with descriptions of "Her isthmus idly spread below" (18), and both the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf (where "baffled Persia's despot fled" (15). The stanza ends:

Or could the bones of all the slain,  
Who perished there, be piled again,  
That rival pyramid would rise  
More mountain-like, through those clear skies,  
Than yon tower-capt Acropolis,  
Which seems the very clouds to kiss. (20-25)

If, as the lines associated with the siege of Corinth state more clearly, the author has invited the reader "to sit with me on Acro-Corinth's brow" (45), why would he refer to Acro-Corinth as "yon tower-capt Acropolis"? Byron, like any other author, knew that "Acropolis" had an immediate reference point. Further, Edward Dodwell recorded the following view from Acro-Corinth: "in the opposite direction is the Saronic gulf, the islands, and the Athenian Acropolis, a white speck in the distance" (II.191). Byron's "yon tower-capt Acropolis" is, I think, *the* Acropolis and it is placed here at the end of the first stanza to focus the reader's gaze away from Corinth and toward Athens as way of conflating the cities and their sieges.

At the end of poem, Minotti stands in a church. The poem does not state that this church, like the Parthenon, had been used as a temple long ago, but we are told the "vaults beneath the mosaic stone/ Contained the dead of ages gone" (920-21). Further, when the Turks attack, they are so filled with vengeance that, after cutting off the heads of the dead, they "fell the statues from their niche" (947), a line that is hard to read without thinking of Elgin. The church has been, throughout the siege, the "Christian's chiefest magazine" (937), just as the Parthenon had been for the Turks in 1687. The Venetians may indeed have used the church in Acro-Corinth as a magazine in 1715, but there is nothing about a church in the explosion at Corinth. At the last minute, after looking at the Madonna smiling at him from the dome, Minotti blows the building, along with defenders and attackers, sky high.

Byron was often proleptic in his writing about Greece, perhaps because he really did come to understand the Greeks during his stay there from 1809 to 1811. Minotti's action anticipates two of the most famous events in modern Greek history. The first occurred in 1826, when, after a siege, the Turks took Mesolonghi. Some of the last defenders gathered in the house that was used as a magazine, and lighted the train at exactly the same moment as did Minotti in the poem (Finlay v.

395). There is an even closer resemblance to the explosion at the Arkhadi monastery in Crete in 1866. The church was used as a magazine and, when the Turks finally breached the walls, the surviving defenders, with the abbot himself, set fire to it. Reports differ, but perhaps 400 Greeks and 450 Turks were lost in that explosion, their intermingled remains strewn around unrecognizably just as at the end of *The Siege of Corinth* (Dakin 111). The explosions at Mesolonghi and Arkhadi are considered glorious events in the struggle for liberation by the Greeks and not examples of the futility of the struggle or equivalence of the opposing sides. Rather, they are examples of where life was lost, and freedom was not won—modern day versions of Thermopylae.

J. P. Mahaffy, the Oxford teacher of Oscar Wilde, went to Greece in 1877. In Athens he chided an old Greek who disparaged Elgin for taking the marbles because the Greeks themselves had bombarded the Acropolis during the War of Independence thereby justifying Elgin's claim that more damage could have been done if the marbles had been left in place. He was taken aback when that same Greek replied that "he himself had been among the assailants and excused the act by the necessities of war" (77). Mahaffy later changed his mind. After viewing the marbles once more in the museum upon his return, he thought that it would have been better to have left them *in situ* despite the possible necessities of war to which they might be subjected. If the Parthenon and other ancient monuments are emblems of the Greek spirit, then Mahaffy came to the conclusion that they should endure the same fate as the Greeks (this argument holds only for those who thought that the Greeks were still the Greeks of course). Byron, I would suggest, also came to the same conclusion but, in Byronic fashion, was willing to take it to an extreme. The marbles should have stayed in Greece and should endure what the Greeks endure. Better an explosion for a good cause, for freedom's battle, than safety in a British Museum. Better wanton devastation for a good cause, than wanton devastation for articles of commerce. For if Byron did, and I agree with St. Clair on this point, use the marbles as a symbol for the fortunes of Greece and the Greeks, he had to ponder, and at some point address, the dangers the marbles faced left *in situ* and, as Morosini's action showed, the damage that might occur.

*The Siege of Corinth*, then, includes Byron's commentary on the man who, in his attacks on Elgin, he did not name. The difference between Elgin and Morosini was that the latter was fighting to rescue Greeks from Turkish tyranny, even if Byron is transposing his own view back on an earlier century. And by moving "the

Venetian siege” from 1687 to 1715, and making the Venetians defenders rather than attackers, it made the explosion of the magazine more glorious and more worthy, more like the Thermopylae (where Freedom, the poems tells us, “saw the Spartan smile in dying” (344); this mirrors the smile of Madonna in the church as Minotti performs his final act (913).) To put it another way, to tarnish the name of Elgin, Byron tried to whitewash the activities of Morosini not simply by viewing them selectively but also by transposing them in time and space.

For the transposition to Corinth did indeed further tarnish Elgin. Just as Byron had substituted a famous Venetian siege for one obscure to most readers, he also offered a siege of Corinth that readers would not expect from the title of the poem. The best known siege of Corinth occurred in 146 BCE, when the Roman consul Lucius Mummius took the city and entirely destroyed it. This was, for some, the final end of Greek freedom; Finlay began his *History of Greece* at this point because his story was the tale of the subjugation of the Greeks under the Romans and the Ottomans. Leake noted that “so complete was the ruin of the city, that the site was deserted for many years; serving only during that time to supply antiquities and works of art to Rome, where a taste for such objects was first excited by the abundance and beauty of those found in the plunder and among the ruins of Corinth” (230-31). In his volume, Hobhouse remarked: “It was not, we may suppose, the sanctity of the place which preserved so many monuments of ancient art from the rapacity of the first Latin conquerors of Greece, but rather an ignorance of their true value in those warriors. I need only allude to the common anecdote of Mummius, as related by Velleius Paterculus” (I.250). The passage of Velleius Paterculus that Hobhouse cited says that “*Mummius*, on the other hand, was so rude and unpolished, that when, upon taking of *Corinth*, he had ordered some Statues of the most excellent Masters in that Art to be transported into *Italy*, he charged those who were to take care of them, that *if any of them were broke, they should find new ones*” (24). In 1812, Sir John Soane called Elgin “the modern Mummius” in a private diary and, although that was not published, the sentiment was surely not unique (quoted in Lavin and Donnachie 190).

So whichever way one follows the threads, whether from a Venetian siege in Corinth to a Venetian siege of Athens or from a siege in Corinth in 1715 to a siege of Corinth in 146 BCE, the skein leads back to Elgin. If, as I have argued, Morosini is hiding in *The Siege of Corinth*, Elgin is hovering over it. As well he should be, for Byron is writing the poem at the very time that Elgin was conducting a campaign to



get Parliament to buy the marbles. By celebrating Minotti's intentional destruction of an old sanctuary, Byron seems to want to make a distinction between the motives of those who struggle for Greek freedom and those of Elgin—and also of those apologists who claim that removing the marbles helped save them from the further depredation. And one would think that Byron would, since he had seen with Hobhouse the dent in the Parthenon's floor from Morosini's gunpowder, have something to say about Morosini's similar sacrilege when he is condemning Elgin. And he obliquely does just that in *The Siege of Corinth*. By transposing the explosion from 1687 to 1715, Byron makes the destruction of a building in the cause of freedom more heroic without having to give explicit approval to Morosini's actions during the siege.

There are some problems to ponder. *The Siege of Corinth* was dedicated to Hobhouse, who disagreed with Byron about the removal of the marbles. Did Byron have that difference in mind when he dedicated the poem to his friend? Clearly, it would help my argument to think so, but I have no answer yet. Further, the cataclysmic ending of the poem deserves some comment. Watkins describes the final scene it as “the collapse of an entire culture” (123), in which there are only animals and an absence of humans. What we have at the end of the poem is no longer a church, or a fortress, or a city, but ruins that have returned to nature just as the ruins that Byron had seen in Greece. And that is when the jackal, whom we are told in a note haunts ruins, appears in the poem. Such a reading could also fit my argument, but remains a suggestion at present.

Finally, all that I have said does not explain the poem. Even granting that some of my connections make sense, a critic could validly point out that Byron has left many of them undeveloped. Byron wrestled with this poem over a long period of time, something unusual for the poet. There are, in sum, several historic groundworks at work in *The Siege of Corinth*, and we need to understand them all to see what the work means. Within one of these networks of associations, we can see why Byron was working on this poem as the Elgin marbles were working their way into the British Museum.

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<sup>1</sup> The price of 35,000 pounds, as even the Select Committee noted, did not amount to even half of what Elgin had expended to get the marbles to London. As St. Clair puts it, “at long

last Elgin was free of the fateful marbles which had hung round his neck for ten years and had been the ruin of his life" (255).

<sup>2</sup> Elgin first attempted to sell the marbles to the British Museum in 1811, but the negotiations ended in failure in 1812. On Elgin's dealings with the British museum and the British government in both 1811 and 1815/16, as well as his activities in the years in between, see St. Clair 173-79; 214-26; and 244-60. Byron was not the only poet to write verses against Elgin, indeed he borrowed concepts and wording from the *Atheniad* of John Galt, "an amateurish piece of mock Heroics" that had neither the audience or effect of Byron's efforts in this arena (St. Clair 197-98).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Heman's *Modern Greece* was first published anonymously and, and at least one reviewer, in the *New British Ladies Magazine*, suggested that the author was Byron. As Wolfson notes, "some may have thought Byron's rage at Elgin tempered by 1817" (161). However, in a letter to John Murray dated September 4, 1817, Byron's comments indicate he did not care for the Hemans poem (BLJ v.5 262).

<sup>4</sup> On the composition and publication of the poem, see the comments of McGann in the *Complete Poetical Works* III. 477-82. McGann argues that Byron began the poem in 1812, wrote further sections of it in 1813 and 1814, and then returned to complete it in 1815. This long gestation has, in the eyes of many critics, affected the quality of the piece. Watkins is not alone in thinking it to be "the least successful of the Eastern Tales" (108).

<sup>5</sup> Watkins and MacColl, among others, have useful discussions of the poem as it relates to the other Turkish Tales. Franklin, in her article in 1988, notes the equally important influence of Goethe's *Die Braut von Korinth*.

<sup>6</sup> McGann noted that "B.'s tale is partly based on oral histories of the siege (see line 720) when he was in Corinth in 1810, and partly on imagination" (CPW 482). Line 720 reads: "We have heard the hearers say," but it is unlikely that in 1810 Byron met anyone who had heard what had happened on August 3, 1715. So some poetic license is being used. As McGann and others have pointed out, the account of the siege in Knolles has some inaccuracies. Finlay recorded that the Venetian commander Minotti survived the slaughter, was sold into slavery and ransomed by a Dutch official in Smyrna (v.221). Whether Byron heard an oral tradition in which Minotti intentionally blew up the magazine or not, however, is hardly relevant. By including the account of the siege in Knolles, he is intentionally challenging the historical account that he himself had provided. It is worth noting that Byron's other Turkish Tales had historical settings that were less specific. "The Giaour" has an advertisement which provides a more general historical grounding in 1790s, "the time the Seven Islands were possessed by the Republic of Venice, and soon after the Arnauts were beaten back from the Morea, which they had ravaged some time subsequent to the Russian invasion" of 1790. "The Bride of Abydos" would seem to be placed around the same time, for Selim joins a "lawless brood" who include "the last of Lambro's patriots," who, Byron tells us, was a Greek famous for his efforts, in 1789-1790, for the independence of his country.

<sup>7</sup> Where Elgin had removed a caryatid from the Erechtheum, there was written, "Quod no fecerunt Goti, ho fecerunt Scoti." Hobhouse quotes the lines, and then goes on to relate the story that when Alaric was going to sack Athens, he was "terrified by two phantoms, one of Minerva herself" and the other of Achilles, and he was so "struck with a reverential respect, he spared the treasures, ornaments, and people of the city" (225).

<sup>8</sup> Finlay noted that the Greek population of the Morea seemed to welcome the Turks when they defeated the Venetians in 1715 (v. 222 and 228). Franklin, among others, notes that Southey's *Roderick* and *The Siege of Corinth* use "the theme of the pagan incursion to show British fears of invasion during the time of the Peninsular war" (69). This is another useful historical groundwork for understanding the poem. Franklin sees a dualism between "love

and freedom” and “obedience and death” (70). My preference is to see the dichotomy between freedom and death (from line 378).

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