

Parallel visions:

Byron, Géricault and the Medusa

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Martin Meisel has noted that Delacroix's 1841 painting *A Shipwreck* was recognised as uniting Géricault and Byron, for not only does the painting illustrate that moment in *Don Juan* when lots are drawn for the human sacrifice (2, 75) but it also invokes comparison with Géricault's 1819 painting entitled *Raff of the Medusa* (Meisel 1988:601). I would like to argue in this paper that Géricault's famous painting and Byron's shipwreck stanzas in the second canto of *Don Juan* have other points of comparison. Géricault used the Savigny and Corréard Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal (1817) as the primary source of information for his treatment of the Medusa incident (Elmer 1971:117). Byron used multiple sources when he researched material for his shipwreck stanzas but it is highly probable that the Savigny and Corréard text was one of them. Thus, the cause célèbre of the wreck of the Medusa is directly treated by Géricault and indirectly by Byron – two artists temperamentally and artistically attuned.

Géricault (1791–1824) and Byron (1788–1824) were almost exact contemporaries. Not only did they die in the same year but July

1819 saw the completion of Géricault's painting of the *Raff of the Medusa* and the publication of Canto Two of Byron's *Don Juan*. It is these two works which bear comparison on grounds deeper than merely this serendipitous July 1819 date. There are other links between the two artists. Géricault illustrated *Mazeppa*, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, and *Lara* for the first French edition of Byron. These were among his last lithographs (Berger 1978:32). It has long been recognised that both Géricault and Delacroix were attracted to Byron but it has been argued that Géricault's illustrations were much more faithful to the written form than those of Delacroix which were more often 'imaginative transformations of what Delacroix perceived on reading Byron's poems' (Archer, *Diss.Abs.* 1987:4393A).

Politically, Byron and Géricault held the same pro-Napoleon and anti-Bourbon views (Berger 1978:30–1). Géricault's *Liberation of Victims of the Inquisition* alludes to Napoleon's 1808 Spanish expedition during which he emancipated the prisoners of the Inquisition. This drawing significantly appeared in 1823, the year in which the Duc d'Angoulême

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