

An Anglo-Portuguese Romantic Encounter during the Shelley-Byron Circle's Intertextual Summer in Geneva: The Identity of the Mysterious Portuguese Lady

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The end of the Napoleonic Wars allowed the British elite to travel to the Continent once again and cities like Geneva were popular destinations where the transformation from aristocratic Grand Tour to the beginnings of mass tourism took place.¹ The idea that in 1816, the year without a summer, the Swiss city was crowded with English travellers is a “self-perpetuating discourse, burgeoning without reference to demographic evidence”, (Buzard 32)² but, like three hundred other British travellers between May and September 1816, a famous group of young British writers met in Geneva during the so-called ‘intertextual summer’.³

John William Polidori was twenty years old when he became Lord Byron’s personal physician and travelled with the poet to Geneva in

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1. V. Vincent, “British” 567. For a list of English guidebooks on Switzerland (1780-1914), see Tissot 44-51.
 2. Based on Swiss records, Vincent concludes that only around 218 British tourists visited Geneva in 1816, stating that the fact that Byron’s private physician, Polidori, the editor John Gifford, or the pastor and geologist William Conybeare “chose not enter their profession [when registering in Geneva] reminds us of the social stigma that was still attached to working for a living (...). The British travellers (...) temporarily transform[ed] the city into a London gentleman’s club, and enabling a social calendar on a par with that of Europe’s capitals. In what was still a provincial town, Europe’s patrician classes could enjoy a feeling of exclusivity that no doubt felt salutary after two decades of revolutionary wars”. (569) See also Heafford 25-47 and Stock 39-64.
 3. Regarding the Byron-Shelley circle’s intertextual summer in Geneva, see Puga, “O Desafio Gótico” 19-106.

April 1816. Before they left London for the Continental tour, Byron's publisher John Murray offered the doctor £500 to write and publish a travel diary. However, Polidori was fired in September and returned to England. He died in 1821 after claiming *The Vampyre* (1819) as his own and publishing *Ernestus Berchtold, or the Modern Oedipus* (1819). His diary manuscript was passed to his sister, Charlotte Lydia Polidori, who transcribed it, removed all erotic excerpts and destroyed the original. The surviving shorter version would only be published in 1911 by the author's nephew, William Michael Rossetti, and is one of the few first-hand accounts of the 1816 summer in Geneva.

In May 1818, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, her stepsister Claire Clairmont and Percy Bysshe Shelley met Lord Byron and Polidori in Sécheron, Switzerland.⁴ At the Villa Diodati this "party of young people", as Percy Shelley (Shelley and Shelley iii) calls the group, read *Fantasmagoriana* (1812) and Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and around 16th June their host, Byron, set them a challenge: "We will each write a ghost story", Mary informs us in her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*. Byron started a vampire novel ("August Darvell: Fragment of a Novel") with a plot that Polidori developed in *The Vampyre*, while Percy Shelley probably wrote his short gothic workshop-poem "A Shovel of His Ashes Took", also known as "Fragment of a Ghost Story". (Puga 2022) In August, after Matthew Lewis' arrival, the group's male members enjoyed their second ghost evening, listening to Lewis' horror tales. However, Polidori and Byron also socialized with several Genevan intellectuals (Charles Victor de Bonstetten, Marc-Auguste Pictet, Doctor de Roche and Pellegrino Rossi) and attended a number of parties and dinners at the villas of Madame de Staël and Countess Bruce, who resided on the opposite (north) side of Lake Lemman in Genthod, which resembled a village and "was to Geneva what Versailles was to Paris". (Naef 130)

Polidori's hostess, of whom little is known, was Countess Catherine de Bruce (1776-1829), born in St. Petersburg and the only daughter of Count James Bruce (1732-1791), a Russian general of Scottish

4. On British tourism in Switzerland during the nineteenth century, see Hefford 25-47.

descent (Clan Bruce), and Countess Praskovya Aleksandrovna Bruce (*née* Rumyantseva, 1728-1785), a Russian lady-in-waiting and confidante of Catherine the Great. According to Polidori, the lively Russian aristocrat was in her forties and had “two husbands, one in Russia, one at Venice; she acted plays at the hermitage under Catherine. Not being able to get a divorce, she left Russia, went to Venice (...) married (...) and separated”. (Polidori 141)⁵ Catherine Bruce married Count Vassili (Basile, Basilius) Moussine-Pouchkine (1773-1836)⁶ of St. Petersburg in 1793 and after their divorce she lived in the Maison d’Abraham Gallatin, (D’Almagro 59; Dolgoroukow 180-181) also known as Le Grand-Saugy, (rue du Village, Genthod)⁷ between 1815 and 1822 where *The Vampyre’s* manuscript remained until it was sent to London and published. The Countess entertained her guests in her property’s “summer houses, porticoes, and baths; neatly planned; an Island with a ditch around it; a Tower of babel round the trunk of a Chestnut; a summer house by the roadside of a Moorish construction” (Polidori 141-142) and the English doctor amused his hostess by telling and writing stories about Byron and dancing in such an extravagant manner as to be considered a “fool” by other guests. (Polidori 145) The families of the Countess’ neighbours, intellectuals and visitors like Polidori met once a week at her villa to be entertained and a mysterious married Portuguese lady, ‘Madame Brélaz’, her two daughters and other guests participated in amateur theatre plays, dances and charades. (Polidori 142-143, 152) At Le Grand-Saugy, the young English diarist seems to have flirted with his hostess, Madame Cleman “who excites love in every young man’s breast” and with the affluent Mademoiselle Jacquet: “half in love with her, –, no, her 8000 a year; her face and bad singing exposures cured me”. (Polidori 145)

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5. Polidori also states that the “Countess is very good-natured, laughs where others calumniate and talk scandal with prudish airs, kind to all. The society is extremely pleasant; generally dancing or music”. (42)
 6. In November 1796, Vassili Valentinovitch Moussine-Pouchkine was allowed to add Catherine’s surname to his own, and henceforth be called Count Moussine-Pouchkine-Bruce.
 7. Concerning the villa built in the early eighteenth century (c. 1722) and previously owned by the banker Abraham Gallatin (d. 1722), see Brulhart 394; Amsler 239-251, and Lescaze 5, who informs: “le domaine de Saugy tire son nom de celui d’une des parcelles qui composent actuellement la propriété, appelée ‘Au Saugy’, qui s’étendait le long de l’actuel chemin qui mène de Genthod au Creux”.

He also confessed to being in love with Madame Brélaz, who was older than him: "Brelaz [*sic*], Portuguese lady, –in love with her; I think fond of me too; imprudent; her daughter also against me on account of it; shows it too much publicly; very jealous; her daughters, sprightly good-looking girls". (Polidori 145-146) Byron's physician must certainly have met the Portuguese lady and her daughters a few times but the romance may have been the fruit of his imagination and so, when he told Byron about his feelings, his employer and Percy Shelley mocked him. (Ellis 97)

In order to be able to enter Villa Diodati late at night to meet Byron, Claire sent him a note asking: "Pray if you can send M. Polidori either to write another dictionary⁸ or to the lady he loves. I hope this may be his pillow & then he will sleep; for I cannot come at this hour of the night & be seen by him; it is extremely suspicious". (Marchand 627) Polidori usually rowed across the lake, met Madame Brélaz and other friends at the Countess' villa before returning home late at night and on 16th September, before leaving Geneva, he bid them farewell and 'Madame B.' cried. (Polidori 152) Madame B. might be Countess Bruce or the Portuguese Madame Brélaz whose letters he received during his return trip near Meillerie: "Read Madame Brelaz's verses. Wept – not at them, but at the prose". (Polidori 153) She later answered his letter: "Got a letter from Brelaz; well written in composition and in letters, but sadly spelled", (Polidori 168) and this lasting 'intimacy' suggests that the crying Madame B. was the emotional Portuguese lady. In Italy, Polidori learnt that Madame Brélaz was involved with another young man called Bertolini (Polidori 155, 182) and we read no more about the Portuguese lady. In the early months of 1818, two years after Polidori's (imaginary?) flirt, Madame Brélaz was still attending parties in Geneva and was being courted by other younger men as "queen of the ball", as some contemporary journals reveal: "Mme Brélaz de Genthod, à laquelle un des princes faisait assez la cour, était la reine du bal". (Suès 239)

8. It was John's father, the Italian scholar Gaetano (Cajetan) Polidori (1763-1853), who had published *A New Pocket Dictionary of the Italian, French, and English Languages* (1806), not the doctor.

Biographers and literary scholars have not identified the Portuguese lady mentioned by Polidori, Byron, Shelley and Claire. Vincent ("Truth" 131) mentions the "Portuguese lady", Macdonald indicates that "the attachment does not seem to have been serious: Polidori doesn't say much about her", (94) while Hobbler and Hobbler mention her as Polidori's "one-time lover", (228) and Edwards and Edwards refer to the doctor's friend as "a certain Madame Brelaz", (105-106) who (the authors suppose) may have sent *The Vampyre's* manuscript to London. Stott suggests that it is difficult to know how involved Polidori and the lady were and that they were primarily friends as "although a keen observer of women, his journal shows that every time he had the chance to interact with them, he became mannered and self-conscious, his feelings mediated by the stiff and scripted language of courtship". (172-173) Stott then concludes: "The lady's identity remains unknown, although she may have been local – there was a George Brélaz living in Lausanne in the late nineteenth century". (366, n. 172) My research, based on Portuguese and Swiss sources,⁹ establishes that the Portuguese lady was Henriette (Portuguese: Henriqueta) Lassence (1780-1848),¹⁰ the wife of a Swiss trader probably born in Lisbon, Pierre Nicolas

9. I consulted, among other, Portuguese and Swiss printed sources, namely (auto)biographical texts (Dolgoroukoff 1867; Biéler 1934; Biéler, B. *et al.* 2005), such including diaries, (Suès 1913) Portuguese and French periodicals (*Supplemento da Gazeta de Lisboa* 05-007-1805; *Revue Encyclopédique ou Analyse Raisonnée des Productions les plus Remarquables* 1830; *Crónica Constitucional do Porto* 1833; Bertram 82-83) and genealogical studies, (Pinto and Baena 1883) family memories, (Shelley and Shelley 1817; d'Almagro 1843; Naef 1943; Lescaze 1976; Barde 1978; Brulhart 1993; Amsler 1999; Duchemin 2003) and official documents published by the Portuguese government *Diário da Camara dos Senhores Deputados da Nação Portuguesa. I. Legislatura. Sessão Ordinária do Anno de 1828*, all listed on the first section of this article's bibliography ("sources").

10. Henriette's parents – the French arms trader Louis Lassence (Grâce-Berleur, Liege: 1733-Lisbon: 1796) and Birgitt Shee (Lisbon: c.1747-Lisbon: c.1797) – married in Lisbon on 7 February 1768 and the young girl is mentioned in Portuguese sources as "Henriqueta Lassence" and her husband as "Pedro Brelaz, from Germany". (Pinto and Baena 65; see also Labourdette 557) Henriette died on 31st March, 1848, in Geneva; she had 2 brothers and 7 sisters, all born in Lisbon.

Brélaz (1767-1835).¹¹ Henriette and Pierre Nicolas married in Lisbon in 1800¹² and had six children – four daughters, Charlotte (1801-1867), Marianne (Marie Anne, 1807-1855),¹³ Clémence (Clémentine, 1811-1892)¹⁴ and Eugénie¹⁵ Brélaz (1813-1893), and two sons, Alfred (b. 1800) and Louis Brélaz (1802-1870).¹⁶ The two unidentified daughters mentioned by Polidori in his journal are Charlotte and Marianne Brélaz.

In 1801, Pierre Nicolas Brélaz bought Maison Maurice, now known as *campagne de Marignac* (Domaine Antoine Maurice), in Genthod from Jean-Frédéric Théodore and around 1807, perhaps due to the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal in November of that year, the Brélaz-Lassence family left Lisbon and settled in Genthod. Owing to the family's Portuguese business, Pierre and members of his family still spent several months a year in Lisbon (Biéler *et al* 310) and these absences may have given Madame Brélaz greater freedom to attend the parties at the Countess' villa. In Genthod, the Brélaz family attended the "chapelle du Témoignage" and the church of Satigny (Biéler 1934) and Henriette and her daughters joined the Swiss Protestant revival movement called *Réveil*, which first appeared in Francophone Switzerland in Geneva. (Stewart 41-114, 147-228) The troubled political situation in Lisbon during the first three decades

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11. The son of Jean Étienne Brélaz (1737-?) and Agathe Constance Eck (1741-1797), from Vevey, married in 1765. He was born in Lisbon, or perhaps in Lutry, canton of Vaud in Switzerland, where he was christened that same year. His sister Angélique (1769-1852) and brother Jean Daniel Brélaz (b. 1772) were born in Switzerland. He is called Pedro (Nicolau) Brelaz in Portuguese sources. (*Crónica Constitucional do Porto* 1833, 211; Pinto and Baena 65) In 1805, Pedro Brelaz lived at number 13 on Travessa das Portas de Santa Catarina (nowadays Travessa da Trindade) and was selling farms in Setúbal and Palmela, (*Supplemento da Gazeta de Lisboa* [n.p.]) and he also sold books printed in France. (*Revue Encyclopédique* 217) The possessions that were taken away from him were given back by the Portuguese government on March 1827. (Cf. "Orçamento" *Diário da Camara dos Senhores Deputados da Nação Portuguesa* 469)
 12. On the Brélaz Swiss family descendants in Lisbon, see Pinto and Baena 65 and Bertram 82-83.
 13. On 22nd October 1829, Marianne, born in Lisbon (17-02-1807), married the Brussels pastor and historian Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné (1794-1872) in Santigny. She died in Geneva in 1855 and her husband published the homage book *Souvenir des Derniers Jours de Marianne Merle d'Aubigné née Brélaz* (Geneva: no publisher) 1855; see Barde 234. On the couple's first meeting and marriage, see Biéler 1934 and Duchemin 2003.
 14. The painter was born in Lisbon and in August 1850 married the Protestant pastor Jules François Lenoir (1825-1867). She died in Neuchâtel in 1892. See Bertram 32-33.
 15. In 1833, she married the Neuchâtel trader Louis Ferdinand du Pasquier (1805-1851).
 16. In 1837, Louis married Liberta Maria da Cruz in Lisbon. Between 1843 and 1870 he was Swiss consul in Brazil (Pará).

of the nineteenth century (the Peninsular War, Liberal Revolutions) affected the family business and in 1831 Pierre sold his Genthod villa to the Russian princess Caroline Galitzine (Golitsyn), *née* Walewska (Biéler 1934), to whom Balzac dedicated his short story "Un Drame au bord de la Mer". (1834)

Little else is known about the family and of the Portuguese lady but my research, based on Portuguese and Swiss sources, has allowed me to solve the Anglo-Portuguese mystery regarding the Shelley-Byron creative community's¹⁷ intertextual summer in Geneva by identifying the mysterious Portuguese lady, Henriette (Henriqueta) Brélaz, and her two daughters mentioned by the poets and Polidori, especially in the latter's journal. The end of the Napoleonic Wars which had forced the Brélaz family to leave Portugal and settle in Geneva around 1807 at the very beginning of the Peninsular War allowed Polidori to meet 'Madame Brélaz' and her two daughters, Charlotte and Marianne Brélaz, in Switzerland.

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17. On the wider implications and ramifications of the Byron-Shelley circle's social interactions and cultural (literary/textual) networks in Geneva, see Higgins 681-683, 685-690 and Puga 2021, 19-106.

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