

The Curse of Minerva

Yes, 'twas Minerva's self; but, ah! how changed,
 Since o'er the Dardan field in arms she ranged!
 Not such as erst, by her divine command,
 Her form appeared from Phidias' plastic hand:
 Gone were the terrors of her awful brow,
 Her idle Ægis bore no Gorgon now;
 Her helm was dented, and the broken lance
 Seemed weak and shaftless e'en to mortal glance;
 The Olive Branch, which still she deigned to clasp,
 Shrank from her touch, and withered in her grasp;
 And, ah! though still the brightest of the sky,
 Celestial tears bedimmed her large blue eye;
 Round the rent casque her owlet circled slow,
 And mourned his mistress with a shriek of woe!

'Mortal!' – 'twas thus she spake – 'that blush of shame
 Proclaims thee Briton, once a noble name;
 First of the mighty, foremost of the free,
 Now honoured *less* by all, and *least* by me:
 Chief of thy foes shall Pallas still be found.
 Seek'st thou the cause of loathing! – look around.
 Lo! here, despite of war and wasting fire,
 I saw successive Tyrannies expire;
 'Scaped from the ravage of the Turk and Goth,
 Thy country sends a spoiler worse than both.
 Survey this vacant, violated fane;
 Recount the relics torn that yet remain:
These Cecrops placed, *this* Pericles adorned,
That Adrian reared when drooping Science mourned.
 What more I owe let Gratitude attest –
 Know, Alaric and Elgin did the rest.
 That all may learn from whence the plunderer came,
 The insulted wall sustains his hated name:
 For Elgin's fame thus grateful Pallas pleads,
 Below, his name – above, behold his deeds!
 Be ever hailed with equal honour here
 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:
Flesh, limbs, and blood the former make their own,
The last poor brute securely gnaws the bone.
Yet still the Gods are just, and crimes are crossed:
See here what Elgin won, and what he lost!
Another name with *his* pollutes my shrine:
Behold where Dian's beams disdain to shine!
Some retribution still might Pallas claim,
When Venus half avenged Minerva's shame.

In this excerpt from Lord Byron's extended poem, Minerva, the Roman equivalent of Athena, the Greek goddess, confronts the poet. When he arrived in Athens in 1810, Byron was, according to his early biographer, John Watkins, 'greatly mortified and thoroughly indignant to see the place dismantled of many of the beauties which had rendered the spot, even in its dilapidated state, sacred in the estimation of all travellers who possess any reverence for the genius of antiquity'. Watkins reports that the ravages of the time, 'and those committed by Barbarians', were puny compared to the spoliation recently perpetrated 'in the name, and by the orders of an English Ambassador at the Porte'. Lord Elgin had 'exerted his influence so effectually as almost to demolish several of the finest of the temples that were then remaining, including removal from the Parthenon of what were later styled the 'Elgin Marbles'. Elgin also had his own name inscribed on a pillar of the temple of Minerva, which Byron later obliterated.

Now that the British Museum has dispatched part of the Parthenon Marbles for exhibition in Russia, confirming they may be safely moved, we look forward to their early return to Athens, where they rightly belong.

Illis in Russia: when will he return to the Parthenon?

