
I Understand, Mamma

Nothing in Lady Byron's life became her like the leaving of her marriage. "The Separation," as it came to be called, shaped and directed the rest of her existence as nothing before or after. Then, too, within the context of her personal and social situation, to shed a husband while retaining position, reputation, fortune, and child was no mean accomplishment.

The wife of Byron was born in 1792 to Sir Ralph and Lady Milbanke after fifteen years of barren but hopeful conjugality; she was christened Anne Isabella and called Annabella. By the time she arrived, her mother, born Judith Noel, was principal heiress to the Wentworth family estates; the current incumbent, Judith's brother, Viscount Wentworth, had no legitimate offspring and little chance of any. The wait had been so long that only Lord Wentworth caviled at her sex, writing his sister early in 1792, "A nephew it must certainly be, for altho' you say you will be as well pleased with a girl I cannot in this respect pay a Compliment to the Sex at the expence of my veracity."¹ No matter; doted upon by a passionately maternal mother and a proud, indulgent father, little Annabella had every reason to believe she would always have her way, and not only within the family circle. She was of "high blood," as Byron would later put it, and the eventual heiress to a title more ancient than his own. Her parents were in debt, to be sure, and the estates her mother would inherit, which in due course would descend to her, were encumbered, but that was not unusual, and of little consequence while rents and income continued to flow.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, most upper-class young men, in fact most who could properly be called "gentlemen," went routinely to a university to finish their education. This shared educational terminus endowed them with a certain uniformity of cultural background and social network, even if a good many of them managed

to finish without having learned much or passed any examinations; for it was then possible to take a degree merely by satisfying the residence requirements. More important for their future social, political, and even professional life were the friends and contacts they made while fulfilling the terms of residence. For the more studious, of course, the opportunities, and again the peer group, were there to assist the aim of learning as well.

For women there was no such expected educational mold, no such common intellectual opportunities. The training of a young lady was completely up to her parents, and particularly her mother. It required special aptitude, unusual dedication, and indulgent or intellectual parents for a lady to become "learned." Learning had no value on the ever-looming and all-important marriage market, but it was not necessarily a disadvantage, if a girl was otherwise personable, well connected, and well dowered.

The vagaries to which the education of an upper-class girl were subject are memorably illustrated in the famous exchange between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, a book that Annabella Milbanke herself pronounced "the *most probable* fiction I have ever read." "It depends," she wrote her mother, "not on any of the common resources of Novel writers. No drownings, nor conflagrations, nor runaway horses, nor lapdogs & parrots, nor chambermaids & milliners, nor rencontres and disguises. . . . It is not a crying book; but the interest is very strong."²

Annabella was not only opinionated and decisive but robust and precociously studious. Her mother's letters attest that she was admired and complimented wherever she went. It is true that Judith insisted on this admiration, but all the evidence indicates it was merited. She read widely and deeply, and filled her notebooks with solemn philosophical and moral comments on all she read and thought and observed. She became particularly addicted to writing "characters," short psychological sketches of persons she knew or would like to know.

Her education departed interestingly from the picture that Jane Austen's "fictions" have left us of the standard accomplishments of the genteel young lady of the time. She learned drawing and dancing, true; but unlike both her mother and her daughter, she seems to have had little interest in music. She read history, poetry, and literature. She studied French, Italian, Latin, and Greek. But she departed most from the commonalty of elegant females in her interest in philosophy, mathematics, and science. For her more abstruse studies she turned, as her daughter was later to do, to William Frend, a mathematician, scientific writer, and friend of her parents.

Mr. Frend had been a Cambridge cleric but had lost his orthodoxy and turned to Unitarianism. His independent, if rather eccentric, views appealed to the liberal, kindly Milbankes, and he influenced Annabella's later involvements in Unitarianism and reform, which sat so oddly with her strident religious pronouncements and punitive moralism. In letters written to her during her adolescence, Mr. Frend employed the mock-formal device of referring to both himself and his correspondent in the third person. When she was fourteen, one such letter began, "Mr. Frend is very much concerned that a variety of occupations has prevented him from noticing the receipt of Miss Milbanke's communications," and went on to inform her, "The manner in which the fourth book of Euclid was completed was highly satisfactory."³ Three years later, "Mr. Frend" was "very much pleased with the elegant manner of solving the series of numbers to the fourth power."⁴ Studies undertaken as a recreation from the real business of life could be pursued at an extremely leisurely pace, and, in fact, the extent to which she ever became a "mathematical Medea" was greatly exaggerated by Byron, who had difficulty in keeping his accounts.

Along with—in her case—series, the serious business of life commenced in earnest when a young woman reached seventeen and made her entrance into "the world." In later life Annabella pictured herself as having left her studious rural preoccupations with reluctance: "Arrived at the age of 17, I was anxious to postpone my entrance into the world, of which I had formed no pleasing conception, and I was too happy in my pursuits—drawing, book-collecting, verse-making—to wish for any other appropriation of my time. But my 'hour was come.'"⁵ Other, more contemporary, evidence suggests that from her first visit to London at age eight she could be torn from its excitements only with difficulty. The lives of gently born females awaiting marriage were so constricted in the nineteenth century that she was far from alone in her eagerness for urban pleasures. But Annabella early showed signs of her lifelong addiction to self-righteousness and contorted reasoning when she explained her intention to leave her sick parents (who should properly have been her chaperons) and hurry to town for her third London season early in 1812. She was, she said, so terribly worried over the health of her friend Miss Montgomery that it would contribute to her parents' peace of mind as well as her own if she joined her friend in London. It was even an act of self-discipline on her part to take up their reluctant permission to depart. "It is also natural to me to be *less* disposed to take, in proportion as *more* is *given*, and it is really in opposition to this impulse that I do not refuse your offer," she concluded sagely.⁶

Despite her precociously developed moral overachievement, she received half a dozen offers of marriage during her first three London seasons, including one from Lord Byron. She refused them all while she composed a "character" for her ideal husband.

London early in the nineteenth century was organized for the pleasure and convenience of the wealthy and powerful. The "season" began rather slowly after the Christmas holidays, which the rich spent on their country estates. It lasted until August, when the stench of the Thames became overpowering and the year's crop of birds and game was waiting to be shot in the rural retreats. During the season an aristocrat was expected to maintain a house, or at least an establishment, in town when he had a daughter of marriageable age. Once there, it was necessary to attend an interminable, and with good fortune, productive round of parties, balls, dinners, plays, and concerts.

In addition to entertainments in private homes and gardens, there were many public pleasure gardens, theaters, and assembly rooms in which to admire the celebrities of the day and be seen in turn. The entertainments helped to mask the actual social, economic, and, increasingly, political business being transacted, that is, the arrangement of profitable marriages. A doggerel verse of the period lampooned this half-hidden preoccupation, with its thinly veiled commercial purposes rampant in a social group that still looked down upon "trade":

Then when Matrons speak of suppers small
 "A few choice friends besides ourselves—that's all"
 This language in plain truth they mean to hold,
 "A girl by private contract to be sold."

Although the "matrons" took a major role and interest in the forging of marriage alliances, F. M. L. Thompson, who quotes the above lines, goes on to acknowledge that

When momentous issues were at stake, and the rescue of an estate from ill-fortune was in question, the conduct of marriages was liable to be taken out of the hands of the matrons. . . . Necessity impelled an impoverished aristocrat to seek a bride of fortune. An heiress to a landed family was the most desirable solution . . . but one who was willing to unite such wealth to foundering gentility could not always be found, unless a large advance in rank was involved. In default, the occasion called for an infusion of mercantile wealth. . . . Lord Sefton's adviser, canvassing ways of clearing off a debt of some 40,000 pounds . . . came to the possibility of the heir, Lord Molyneux, mar-

rying. "To marry a fine brought up Lady with little or no fortune would be to hurt the Estate. By the Estate he has a right to expect a large sum with a Lady, not to look at less than 60,000. . . . *many* a great and rich banker would be glad of an offer to give his daughter that fortune for her advancement and dignity."⁸

The sentiment expressed reflects the commensurability of status and money, as well as the lingering view that income derived from the rent of agricultural or urban land was socially superior to that proceeding solely from banking, commerce, or industry. Nevertheless, if inherited land could be made to yield added revenue from the coal or other minerals it contained or (later) from its value to the spreading railway network, no social status would be sacrificed by taking advantage of this added piece of good fortune. Money that supported women, heiresses or widows, however, was usually invested for them by the trustees of their estates and often in such safe receptacles as government securities, which tended to yield relatively low returns. The passage quoted also reveals the near-universal assumption that the wishes of a marriageable woman were a faithful reflection of those of her father, and that even the heir would do well to attend the advice of the family banker.

In theory, a young gentlewoman was free to accept or refuse any eligible man who proffered himself. In practice, her contacts were carefully restricted, before entering the world, to family members and family friends, and afterward to those who were admitted to occasions presided over by her appointed chaperons and social sponsors. Under these circumstances, women had very little of a personal nature to judge by in accepting or rejecting a prospective husband. Men, to be sure, often had even less, but relied on the assumption that if little was known, there was little to be known. Byron, according to his best friend, chose Miss Milbanke in the belief that she was rich, amiable, and "of the strictest purity." Most couples at marriage scarcely knew each other, unless they were related. (In the small, select circle in which Miss Milbanke and her future husband moved, cousin marriage was common and approved; it could help to keep the family wealth together. Its dangers were less well recognized.)

The men admitted to the great houses and to the functions sponsored by the matrons were carefully screened for their religious and class origins; there was also a tendency for prominent hostesses to have political preferences, and to make up their guest lists accordingly. For the aristocracy, entrance to the House of Lords was almost automatic for the holder of a title, while entry to the House of Commons for heirs and younger sons was smoothed by the control over local con-

stituencies held by large landholders. The political aspect of social life became more important as the century wore on. As the direct predominance of large landholders waned, ambitious middle-class men sought heiresses to help finance their aspirations to a parliamentary career.

After a marriage offer had been made and accepted by the parties most nearly involved, it remained for others—solicitors, guardians, and trustees—to hammer out the financial arrangement, which was known as the “marriage settlement.” Until this process was completed to the satisfaction of the bride’s guardian and of the current owners of any property that the bride or groom hoped to inherit, and until trustees were appointed to protect the interests of both parties, no marriage could be celebrated. The details could take months to complete, but there were generally accepted notions about how much money could be expected to change hands—at the marriage, upon the deaths of the couple, and upon the marriages or maturation of their children.

Once more, the novels of Jane Austen provide a number of allusions to such matters. At the opening of *Mansfield Park*, for example, we are told that “Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram . . . and her uncle, the lawyer, himself allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.” Thompson makes these guidelines even more specific: “In marriages between equals in aristocratic circles, portions of 10,000 to 30,000 pounds were normal, and the bride could expect a jointure of at least 10%.”⁹ The “portion” was the amount a daughter or younger son could expect to be given or to inherit out of the family wealth and property; the lion’s share was reserved for the eldest son. A daughter generally received her share upon marriage—rather, her husband received it; a younger son was provided for when the time came to launch him on a career or profession.

If a woman did not marry, her portion was used to support her after her father died. In the more usual case where her portion became her dowry, a woman could expect to receive during her husband’s lifetime an annual allowance known as “pin money”—usually several hundred pounds, or one percent of her dowry—which she could spend as she liked. After her husband’s death she received an income for life from his estate, which was known as her “jointure.” The dowry, then, could be considered a kind of insurance policy, intended to maintain a well-born woman in the style her family considered appropriate, or as an investment.

Normally, returns on investments, other than highly speculative ones, then ran around five percent, so, to make up the expected ten percent, a man's estate had to be encumbered to maintain his widow if she was of equal or higher birth than his own, often to the great annoyance of his heirs. An estate charged with the support of several dowagers (in contrast to one charged with the debts of a profligate incumbent) was considered heavily burdened indeed. The pin money, on the other hand, represented a less than normal return on investment; but this was supposed to be discretionary money, and a wife expected to receive her maintenance in addition. In reality, there was some vagueness over just what the pin money was intended to cover, and more than one well-dowered wife was reduced to maintaining herself and her children on her pin money, salvaged by her trustees, after a dissolute husband ran through her fortune and deserted her. Fortunately, the several hundred pounds of aristocratic pin money amounted to as much in many cases as a middle-class family income.

A classic illustration of such an outcome was the case of Catherine Byron, the mother of the poet, who had brought well over £20,000 to her husband in 1785 but had to subsist with her son, and the appurtenances of gentility, on £150 a year after she was deserted in 1790. During at least part of the next eight years, she lived on even less, while she was paying interest on a loan she raised for her husband's benefit before he died in 1791. Yet in 1798, when Byron inherited the family title and estates at the age of ten, his mother found that their financial troubles were only beginning.

From the sixteenth century it had been the custom among the aristocracy and other large landholders, who collectively constituted the gentry, to ensure the proper descent of important estates by means of a legal device known as the "strict settlement." It was also called a marriage settlement, since the head of the bridegroom's family, usually his father, found marriage a convenient occasion to place conditions upon his heir, who might otherwise inherit his patrimony with the freedom to sell or alienate it at his pleasure. By law, land could be tied up by "entail" for no more than three generations, so a practice grew up by which it was resettled in each generation. Generally, the heir about to be married was quite happy to agree that his future property would descend to his hypothetical eldest son, and content to exchange a few future freedoms for the assurance of an adequate income during his father's lifetime. The device of the strict settlement, the bridegroom's side of the marriage settlement, increased in importance when the profound changes in England's agricultural system during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resulted

in a smaller, but wealthier and more powerful, landed class, in possession of larger and more highly consolidated estates.

The patrimony inherited by Byron at the age of ten was not his father's, but had belonged to his great-uncle. This Lord Byron was known as "the Wicked Lord," mainly because he had killed his neighbor and kinsman in a dispute over game, for which crime he had been tried in the House of Lords. Like too many Byrons, the Wicked Lord was reckless with money in his youth. Later on, he deliberately despoiled his own lands and sold part of them (illegally, because they were entailed), just to spite his son, whose marriage he had disapproved. The son died in 1776, leaving as heir a son who died in 1794, so the final heir of this calamitous family, the future poet, inherited an estate free of entail but burdened with debt and litigation.

Byron's mother descended from the Scottish nobility and was thus considered somewhat inferior to the English aristocracy; she was ignored by her son's paternal relations, including the guardian formally appointed to surpervise his affairs. Alone, except for an extremely dilatory and possibly venal family solicitor, she had to learn the arts of managing a debt-ridden estate and a lawsuit for the illegally alienated land. Mrs. Byron was very frugal, but both mother and son were bound, in his case with enthusiasm, to keep up the munificent appearances appropriate to the nobility, regardless of actual penury. Appearances included not only fine clothes but an irreducible minimum of servants of both sexes, a carriage and sufficiency of horses, a ready supply of pocket money for possibly quixotic disbursements, and a suitably careless scrutiny of bills. Not required were the prompt payment of tradesmen's bills or of debts other than those incurred in gambling. The upshot of Byron's strict adherence to this gentlemanly code of honor was that by the time he reached his majority he was seriously in debt; after he came of age, his debts continued to increase.

His solicitor's remedy was that he should sell his estates, a solution he at first resisted. The hope of recapturing the disputed land, which contained rich mines and quarries, was always before him to soften the need for urgent action or even economy. But Byron was not really interested in property, except as it yielded income. The lawsuit was not finally settled, and the land in question legally sold (for far less than he had expected), until a few months before his death. His ancestral seat, Newstead Abbey, was sold years before then at a price that formed the bulk of his legacy.

His mother's solution, when he was in his early twenties, was to revert to Lord Sefton's adviser's advice: he must "mend his fortune in the *old* and usual way by marrying a Woman with two or three

hundred thousand pounds.”¹⁰ She forgot the marital disaster this custom had brought upon herself. Byron’s own first remedy when he came of age was to try to escape his creditors by borrowing more money and embarking on an extended tour of the Mediterranean, where lay adventure and freedom far exceeding the English gentleman’s privileges with housemaids. He got no farther than Greece, but there he enjoyed with some youths relations that in England at the time were punishable by death.

After two years of wandering and frolicking with both sexes, Byron ran out of borrowed money. He returned to England intending to take up not only his debts but also a political career in the House of Lords, to which his title admitted him and for which his talents and flair for the dramatic seemed to augur success. Soon afterwards, too, the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, a romanticized account of his grand tour, brought him instant celebrity. The fascination of his fame, youth, beauty, and peerage was only enhanced by the brooding melancholy he affected, perhaps over his debts, or his congenitally misshapen right foot, or the scandalous propensities of his family. He was also not averse to letting fall occasional hints of his own “crimes.” All of this made him, as Miss Milbanke reported to her mother, “the object at present of universal attention,” fit to enliven the longueurs of the 1812 mating season.

Byron shared with his future daughter, though not to such extremes, the wide swings of mood that caused him to pursue some interest or activity for a period with intense enthusiasm and dedication, only to abandon suddenly in disgust and boredom what had previously seemed so enthralling. Then he would become prey to deep depressions. His parliamentary career represents a case in point. He had been a member of the Whig party (the predecessor of the Liberal Party) since his Cambridge days, and on 27 February 1812, when he delivered his maiden speech in the House of Lords, he had chosen his subject in consultation with Lord Holland, a leading Whig. It was a defense of the stocking workers of Nottingham, who were protesting their displacement by labor-saving machinery called “stocking frames.” The protests sometimes took the form of vandalism and breaking the frames, and a bill had been introduced to punish such behavior by death. Byron’s speech, both sensible and compassionate, was considered a great success, though very radical. The bill passed nonetheless, after modification. His second speech favored Catholic emancipation, another liberal cause, but he made only one other. Soon he became disillusioned with the Lords and ceased to attend.

His time and attention were taken up with his new social and sexual successes, and his debts. He had become reconciled to selling his home in order to shake off his financial burdens and assure himself of an income, steady though modest by aristocratic standards. But why did he not marry and, at a stroke, mend both his fortunes and his character? Despite his glamour, it was not a simple matter. The women who now threw themselves at him most freely and engagingly were married already. Maidens were constrained to be far more demure, and Byron was surprisingly passive in sexual pursuit.

In the early nineteenth century the sexual freedom of married women in polite society was steadily eroded. In Byron's youth upper-class women, once wed, were permitted great latitude within their social stratum. The change was brought about, not by the influence and example of Queen Victoria and her prudish Prince Consort, nor by the rectitude of the previous consort, Queen Adelaide, but by the recognized desirability of controlling and regulating the assimilation of new wealth into the ranks of the politically powerful. In the early nineteenth century, because of its increased size and, even more, because of the number of claimants to membership, elite society became Society, more formal, rigid, and rule bound than it had previously been when the landed gentry knew each other and knew their political ascendancy supreme and unchallenged. The newly rich of the industrial revolution had to be admitted, but slowly, and after having fully adopted the standards prescribed by Society's arbiters. In this process of class formation, women played a crucial part in establishing and maintaining the rules both by their own behavior and by their censure of others.

Progressively deprived of their traditional economic and public pursuits, respectable women in the nineteenth century were increasingly required to perform only the essential female functions of defining and defending, through their lineage and their personal conduct, the identity of the intermarrying group to which they belonged. Thus, while Annabella could not appear in public unchaperoned, her mother campaigned actively for her father's parliamentary elections and even made speeches on his behalf. Her father's sister, Lady Melbourne, was an important Whig hostess, whose adulteries were widely known but confined within aristocratic circles. As Lady Byron, separated and widowed, Annabella could herself manage her estates, found experimental schools, and organize philanthropies. Her daughter, brilliant and blue blooded, as a married woman was excluded from the management of both her own and her husband's property, and had to exercise the greatest care not to have her name mentioned outside a close circle of friends and relatives.

Annabella's aunt, Lady Melbourne, was one of the most fascinating and congenial of the ladies who cultivated Byron. She was determined, she told him, to teach him "Friendship," but she was also the mother-in-law of Lady Caroline Lamb, another and much younger married woman who threw herself at him with such abandon that an open scandal was threatening. Lady Melbourne tried to avert the danger by encouraging him to propose to her niece, but he responded so half-heartedly, using the aunt as a go-between to convey his offer, that Annabella very sensibly refused. Then, as tired and disgusted by Society as he had been by the House of Lords, Byron prepared once more to go abroad, as soon as his estates and debts were settled.

While waiting, he turned easily to other women, including his own half-sister, Augusta Leigh, and Annabella began to repent her refusal. Less than a year after rejecting his proxy proposal, she daringly took the initiative in opening her own correspondence with him. It was a most improper thing to do, however she extenuated it; couples who were not engaged were not supposed to correspond at all, or even to call each other by their first names (a familiarity that some wives, including Lady Byron, never attained). Yet Annabella was at the same time writing to another young bachelor, the brother of her friend Miss Montgomery.

Piqued perhaps at receiving overtures from a girl who was otherwise so controlled and decorous (the mother of another rejected suitor had called her an icicle), Byron responded; the clandestine correspondence continued for over a year. It was not an entirely secret exchange, however, for against Annabella's express wishes Byron continued to discuss her and her letters with Lady Melbourne, and Annabella had her own confidants. With Lady Melbourne he also discussed his growing erotic attachment to Augusta, though she counseled him against this danger as earnestly as she had against that of eloping with Lady Caroline. Incest did not actually become a crime in England until 1906, but adverse publicity and social censure were punishments more feared in Society than legal penalties, particularly among women, and particularly among those who, like Augusta, had a court appointment and income to lose.

For a long time Byron ignored Annabella's many hints that she was in love with him, but at length Augusta too became urgent that he should marry. Her first choice, and his, was her good friend and relation by marriage, Lady Charlotte Leveson-Gower. When an offer in that direction was refused because Lady Charlotte's parents had other plans for her, he fell back upon an alternative plan and made a second proposal to Miss Milbanke. Evidently, he was more attractive

to wealthy young ladies than to their guardians, but Annabella had long since bent her parents' wills to her own. The second offer was as half-hearted as the first—he was at the same time cheerfully planning to go abroad with a friend should she refuse—but this time she closed with it at once.

During the ensuing months, in which his as-always dilatory solicitor went leisurely about the business of drawing up the marriage settlement, Byron's nervousness over the prospect of marrying a woman of whom he knew so little (and not all of that congenial) intensified. A visit to improve the acquaintance was delayed; when it did take place, it was not a success. The Milbankes bored him. His attempts to familiarize himself with the young lady were, if anything, too successful. Roused to the point where she felt her propriety threatened, she cut short the visit and ordered him to leave. But despite his misgivings, he was now bound by the prevailing etiquette to complete the marriage; the rupture of an engagement was a woman's prerogative. Moreover, although the sale of his estate was in progress but stalled, with the purchaser unable to produce more than the initial £25,000 deposit, marriage itself still seemed advantageous. If his new wife did not succeed in domesticating him even as she eased his debts, she could still produce an heir, and he could still avail himself of the freedom permitted to husbands. If worst came to worst, he could always resume his travels.

In the marriage settlement he was prepared to be generous; or else the Milbanke solicitor drove a hard bargain. Annabella's dowry was to be £20,000, of which £16,000 would go toward the dowry of a daughter or the portion of a younger son. All of this was quite normal; however, he agreed to settle the income from £60,000 of his own property on her as a jointure, and this was £10,000 more than his advisers felt warranted. Furthermore, he did not insist that her father and uncle settle their property on her at the same time. To be sure, there was not much danger there: she was an only child, the obvious recipient of whatever her father and mother were free to leave her, and her mother stood to receive the bulk of her uncle's estate. Annabella's father was himself badly in debt, the result of lavish entertaining and the expenses of his political campaigns. (As a baronet, he was not a peer, and he had to campaign for election to the House of Commons.) The upshot was that most of her dowry was not paid during Byron's lifetime. Instead, Sir Ralph paid his son-in-law interest on the amount owed, and most of that was given to Annabella in the form of the pin money that was part of the marriage settlement. Marrying an heiress was not to prove an immediate solution to the problem of debt.

The marriage itself has been generally termed a disaster from the first by historians, a sentimental lot who tend to believe that the married state is inherently a happy one. Yet in the end both partners achieved what they could not have done unmarried. Byron had often spoken of marriage with contempt; he did not like to dine or to spend the night with a woman, and he was totally averse to the type of long-term cohabitation that marriage usually implies. The only women he liked were perfectly undemanding, adjusting themselves readily to his preferences for companionship. After the separation was achieved, he was once more free to travel abroad, still technically married and immune from other attempts and expectations along those lines. Moreover, he was no longer so flayed by guilt; he felt he had been punished enough.

As for Lady Byron, she had been accustomed to having her way from earliest childhood, but as a grown woman she could not expect to gratify her taste for universal domination outside her family circle, or even within it, in any situation so well as in that of a titled widow of independent means, with sole control over her child. Even before Byron's death, separation, with herself cast in the role of the suffering saint, brought to her many of the advantages of widowhood. It was as if she had had to pass through marriage to emerge on the other side.

Nevertheless, for a while both were miserable enough. As a husband Byron behaved so badly that his wife formed a theory that he might be insane, and Augusta, a witness to some of his outbursts, eagerly concurred. Yet he was shocked and outraged when Annabella left. True, he had talked of separation from the very beginning, but he had thought to set the time and the circumstances, if not to do the actual leaving. It was very upsetting: her sudden escape had been carefully though quietly prepared, and had been planned even before the birth of their child.

If the child had been a son, it cannot be doubted that Byron would have fought harder than he did to retain his parental rights. Even as it was, to leave her husband and retain her daughter meant that Annabella had to thread her way through a legal and social minefield. Two other famous marital disasters, though they occurred later in the century, are illuminating with respect to what she faced. Notably, both concerned sexual irregularities on the part of the husband.

The first was that of the John Ruskins. Effie's flight to her parents' house was as fearfully and stealthily planned as Annabella's own. Ruskin was impotent, and since Effie proved upon examination to be still a virgin after six years of marriage, she was granted an annulment.

Nevertheless, her action raised a storm of criticism, some ladies even suggesting she should have been grateful for her situation. Effie claimed it was John's unkindness that was her real reason for ending the marriage, but the law did not recognize unkindness. Still, her social position was affected; Queen Victoria refused to receive her for forty years, relenting at last only as a favor to her dying second husband, the president of the Royal Academy, John Millais.

The second case involved a distant cousin of Virginia Woolf who had married into the aristocracy, but whose husband was a flagrant homosexual. According to Woolf's biographer, "Lord Henry fled to Italy and there, in that land of Michelangelesque young men, lived happily ever after. His wife discovered that she had been guilty of an unformulated, but very heinous, crime: her name was connected with a scandal. Good society would have nothing more to do with her. She was obliged to retire from the world."¹¹

Byron had demonstrated that he was anything but impotent. Their daughter was born on 10 December 1815, less than a year after the wedding. His brutality was inadequate as grounds for separation or divorce, although he had neglected, insulted, and humiliated her since their wedding day, both in private and before witnesses. Equally inadequate were his frequent drinking bouts and that, drunk or sober, he tried to frighten her by threats and vandalism. And also inadequate as justification for wifely desertion were his infidelities, or that he taunted her with them, as part of a catalogue of mental cruelties he repeatedly practiced on her. Finally, and so far ignored even by modern scholars, who take such practices as much for granted as did the societies of the past that they study, there is evidence that the sexual molestation begun before marriage continued afterwards and might on more than one occasion have amounted to rape—again, inadmissible as grounds of wifely complaint.

One of the lines most frequently quoted from Byron's own account of the marriage—burned soon after his death, though not before avid perusal by a number of people—was, "Had Lady Byron on the sofa before dinner." This was in reference to the wedding day, and to a time following a dismal drive in a freezing carriage, during which both were nervous and out of sorts. According to her later narratives, he had already begun his mysteriously menacing prophecies. As for Annabella, if she was not exactly "purity & innocence itself," as her daughter and the rest of the world came to believe, she was certainly inexperienced, and this preprandial consummation, when a servant announcing dinner was momentarily expected, must have been an unwelcome and unpleasant culmination of his premarital gropings.

As it began, so it seems to have ended. Byron's insistence that Annabella had "*lived* with him, as his wife, up to the day of her departure,"¹² while meant to imply an affectionate and pleasurable relationship during that period, actually suggests a painful and disagreeable experience for a woman so soon after childbirth. She had many reasons to wish to flee, but she had no recognized grounds for complaint, none at least that were not double edged. It took an unusually determined woman to make a successful escape, and the effort marked the rest of her life.

To achieve a separation while retaining her social acceptability, her financial independence, and the custody of her month-old child required that "the world" be made to believe that her husband was a monster of iniquity and she was a faultless saint; yet she could not be seen to be the one who did the showing. Around this objective Lady Byron organized her existence. She had obtained the expert advice of Dr. Stephen Lushington, a prominent lawyer who was to argue in favor of widow burning in India before the Privy Council, but who never failed to support his noble client against all her adversaries as long as she lived and afterward. As she explained to her mother, "I have been *perfectly* confidential [i.e., confiding] with Dr. Lushington and so far from thinking that the *suspensions* could do any good to me, he deprecates beyond anything the slightest intimation of them, as having the appearance of Malice—and altogether most injurious to *me* in a social view. The Misfortune of my case is that so little has passed before Witnesses—and the wife's deposition *unsupported* is of no avail."¹³

Lady Byron herself developed a taste and skill for legalistic ratiocination, in which she exceeded all her highly accomplished, expensive, and obliging solicitors. Byron too was of some assistance, at first praising her truthfulness, character, and conduct to her father and to his own friends, though later he changed his mind. Furthermore, it had been he himself who had dropped broad hints to his wife about his homosexual activities in Greece and his incestuous attachment to his sister. Yet she could prove nothing, and had reason to fear a court procedure even more than he. A whispering campaign of rumors, for which she would claim no responsibility, was much better suited to her purposes, and for this Lady Caroline Lamb, her cousin by marriage and his discarded mistress, eagerly offered her services.

There could be no going back. Historians and biographers who have deplored her inflexible refusal to consider Byron's boyishly earnest appeals for reconciliation overlook what was always so clearly before her: if she put herself once more in his power, she would appear to

have condoned all his past conduct and to have denied the more shocking accusations. She could never again hope to escape. Furthermore, as even her otherwise hysterical and overwrought mother so sensibly pointed out, if much of his admitted unkindness and cruelty had been justified (by him) as revenge for the refusal of his first offer of marriage, what would his behavior now be if she returned to him?

Partly in return for a disavowal of responsibility for the most scandalous rumors, Byron, after a perhaps unflatteringly short struggle, agreed to a separation in which his wife's pin money was increased to £500 per year, the disposition of her inheritance was to be left to arbitration when the time came, and the rest of the marriage settlement was left unchanged. Immediately afterward he left England, never to return alive. When Lady Byron's mother died in 1822, she inherited the Wentworth estates, and both Byrons, as was required and customary in similar cases, added the Noel family name to their own. The arbitrators decided to split the Wentworth income evenly between them, but legal delays prevented Byron from receiving any of his share until over a year later, shortly before his own death.

No mention was made in the separation agreement of another vital issue, the custody of the the child Ada. This was because the legal situation at the time was so much in the father's favor that Annabella's lawyers decided not to raise the question. Had Byron chosen, or been provoked, to press his rights, he could certainly have gained possession of his daughter. He never attempted to do so, only issuing an occasional protest over what he considered an exceptionally high-handed instance of subversion of his paternal dignity, as when Ada was made a ward in chancery (a legal device for protecting the property settled on a minor) without consulting him. "A Girl," he thought, "is in all cases better with the mother." Nevertheless, much of Annabella's behavior during the separation battle and afterward was justified, if not determined, by anxiety over retention of her child. Thus, a variety of rumors, ranging from aggravated adultery to bigamy, homosexuality, and sodomy, after preliminary circulation, were allowed to die, while the whisper of incest was remorselessly, though intermittently and surreptitiously, revived.

Byron's half-sister Augusta was an obvious choice to be given in the care of the baby if it were taken from its mother, especially since he chose to travel in unhealthy and politically unstable foreign places. The suspicion of incest simultaneously attacked both his and her suitability. Annabella prepared documents in secret to lend plausibility to the charge, if it should become necessary, and mercilessly persecuted

Augusta under the pretext of reforming her character. When the time was ripe, she would reveal to her daughter the wickedness of the aunt whose namesake she was. Ada had been christened Augusta Ada and was actually referred to as "little Guss" by Augusta, Annabella, and Judith during the first weeks of her life. Byron himself, however, seems always to have called her Ada. It was, he explained, a family name, dating from the time of King John.

In addition to undermining Byron's and Augusta's reputations for parental fitness, Annabella strove mightily to build a case for her own. Considering the universal assumptions about the overwhelming force of maternal love, it is surprising to see how deliberately and self-consciously she went about this. Her passion was for control, not care; and there is much evidence that, whether by character or by circumstances, she found herself unable to love her child. Any private doubts she might have had over the inadequacy of her affection served only to strengthen her determination never to let others suspect any such failings. Motherhood succeeded wifedom as the name of her propensity for self-justification, only to be replaced by grandmotherhood.

Soon after the proceedings for separation were underway, Annabella became restless and dissatisfied with permitting her parents to act in her name in dealing with solicitors and well-wishers in London. Asserting that "the Child is weaned necessarily & without difficulty," she returned to town to take matters into her own hands. There she stayed until the bitter end, lingering until Byron was safely out of the country, but not without becoming concerned that her action might inspire adverse comment, which she took prudent steps to prevent. "As I am accused openly of total disregard of the Child's welfare," she wrote her mother, after Byron had urged reconciliation as her maternal duty, "I think it may be well to write you some letters on the subject *which may be kept*, and I shall begin tomorrow." Then, as she explained in a postscript, finding she had some time in hand, "I shall write a letter to-day *to be kept*."¹⁴ So she proceeded to write some letters of instruction and inquiry about the baby's health and daily routine.

Yet she was nothing if not introspective, and there was none to whom she tried more assiduously to justify her feelings and conduct than her notebook. She reflected and decided that her inability to love her child stemmed from her uncertainty over custody. She expressed her sentiments in verse, for she too wrote poetry:

The Unnatural Mother, Dec 16, 1815

My Child! Forgive the seeming wrong—
 The heart with-held from thee
 But owns its bondage doubly strong,
 Resolving to be free.

.
 And if already taught to feel
 She must not feel too far,—
 Devoted once with fruitless zeal
 Her peace on earth to mar,
 Then ere another passion rise
 In kindred with the first
 She pauses o'er those tender ties,
 And sees them—formed to burst!¹⁵

It was a nice touch; it was all his fault, even her maternal coldness. If dated correctly, the verses were composed only a few days after Ada's birth and show that she was then planning her flight and foreseeing its possible consequences. The feelings she expressed here persisted, and months later she penned more verses along the same lines, observing that "heart-wrung I could almost hate / The thing I may not love."

Time moved on; with Byron safely abroad, her anxiety over custody must have subsided. Yet she still found herself having deliberately to plan and justify her maternal behavior. A few days after Ada's first birthday she filed a position paper in her journal:

I will endeavour seriously to consider and diligently to execute the duties of a Mother, and to divest myself of wrong bias arising from my particular circumstances or morbid feelings. I think Ada has arrived at an age when a watchful & judicious superintendence may form the basis of good habits, & prevent the rise of evil ones. It is now, as it always has been, my opinion that a Mother should give this attention more systematically & unremittingly than is usually considered incumbent upon her. . . . I shall suffer from interfering powers, & want of sympathy with my views. . . . I shall thus dare to engage my affections—I *might* now with-hold them—I might spare myself the danger of loving—the fear of deprivation—the vexation of opposition—But all these I will meet and Thou—to whom it is known that I would do thy will as allotted to me do thou bless & confirm my humble pledge to be a good Mother.¹⁶

Though she flirted with Unitarianism, Annabella generally remained among those who called themselves "Christian, unattached"; nonetheless, she began early to amass a reputation for piety that became

ever more insistent as she grew older. In the beginning, at least, it was quite as deliberately constructed as her maternal tenderness. "I have made a good impression," she wrote her mother in describing some new acquaintances, "but the funniest thing is that because I go to church very regularly & sometimes talk pye-house (pious) . . . it is supposed in the 'Assembly of the Saints' that I am on the high-road to Heaven."¹⁷

Her determination to acquire a command over Ada's habits needed no reinforcement or aid from divine sources. When Ada was three, she made another entry in her journal:

The cause of the ascendancy of one mind over another is in general, not so much the superior strength of the governing character as the correspondence of certain of its qualities to the weakness of the governed—Therefore, if emancipation is desired, a resolute and unsparing investigation of our own infirmities, and the annihilation of every delusion of the Imagination is the only means of radical cure.¹⁸

Perhaps she was already forming her views of the special nature of her role in her daughter's life. Ada's psyche was endlessly analyzed, not only by her mother but by other "experts," friends, and teachers, who were invited to add their "characters" of Ada to those Lady Byron composed herself. One, unfortunately undated, that the anxious mother must have found particularly congenial began, "A desire to govern the minds of others is a leading feature in Miss Byron's character. She will gain ascendancy over most of those with whom she comes in contact. The few whom she cannot govern will generally be those who might exercise almost a slavish control over her." The same sage attributed these deplorable propensities to "the nature of her nervous system."¹⁹ The victor in her clash of wills with Byron was certain she had sufficient steel to overcome any desire to govern on the part of a daughter whose character she later termed "so anomalous—so gifted & so defective." And so in contrast to her own. "My rule over the baser kind of spirit is so absolute," she concluded, "that I think I must have some qualifications for a Police officer, or Governor of Convicts."²⁰

In view of his wife's determination to possess and dominate her child so absolutely, it is natural to ask what kind of parent Byron might have been. While Lady Byron was girding herself for governance, his fantasies were far more sentimental:

To aid thy mind's development, to watch
Thy dawn of little joys, to sit and see
Almost thy very growth, to see thee catch

Knowledge of objects, wonders yet to thee!
 To hold thee lightly on a gentle knee,
 And print on thy soft cheek a parent's kiss,—
 This, it should seem, was not reserved for me;
 Yet this was in my nature. . . .²¹

His nature had a fair chance to realize itself in connection with his illegitimate daughter Allegra, born in 1817, whose sole custody he took from her mother in infancy. Since illegitimate children and their fathers were more socially acceptable than their mothers, the arrangement seemed to offer Allegra something like the social and worldly advantages she might have had if she had been born in wedlock. But in the event, Byron kept her with him for only a short space of time. He was then living in Venice, and for some months she was placed in the house of the British consul there, who did not approve of her, passed her around to others, and finally delivered her back to her father. When she became spoiled and demanding as a result of the amused attention she received, Byron placed her in a convent.

Given the precarious political situation and the medically insalubrious climate in which Byron lived, there was some practical reason to shelter a young child in such a place. Once she was installed, however, he never visited her, though Shelley did. He even resented the child's demands for visits, sweets, and gifts, which he condemned as cupboard love. But when Allegra died in the convent, aged only a little over five years, Byron grieved extravagantly. He had her expensively embalmed and shipped back to England for burial at Harrow, his old public school. If Allegra had survived, how would he have aided her mind's development? His plans for her included a Catholic upbringing and a proper Continental marriage. He heartily disliked women with intellectual pretensions, and his ridicule had often reduced even the complacent, self-righteous Annabella to tears. What effect would he have had on Ada, who gloried in her mind but retained a diffident sensitivity to criticism? How would she have flourished in the face of his sardonic wit?

In his famous farewell lines to his wife, Byron had asserted, "Even though unforgiving, never / 'Gainst thee shall my heart rebel." But before very long he was denouncing her bitterly to his sister, and then he pilloried her far more publicly, in a cutting picture of a pretentious bluestocking:

Her favourite science was the mathematical,
 Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity,
 Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was Attic all,

Her serious sayings darkened to sublimity;

She knew the Latin—that is, “the Lord’s prayer.”
And Greek—the alphabet—I’m nearly sure;
She read some French romances here and there,
Although her mode of speaking was not pure. . . .

Just in case anyone might not recognize the picture as drawn from life, he added a few snippets of unmistakable autobiography.

For Inez called some druggists and physicians,
And tried to prove her loving lord was *mad*,
But as he had some lucid intermissions,
She next decided he was only *bad*;

.
She kept a journal, where his faults were noted,
And opened certain trunks of books and letters,
All which might, if occasion served, be quoted;

.
Calmly she heard each calumny that rose,
And saw *his* agonies with such sublimity,
That all the world exclaim’d, “What magnanimity!”

No doubt this patience, when the world is damning us,
Is philosophic in our former friends;
‘Tis also pleasant to be deemed magnanimous,
The more so in obtaining our own ends;
And what the lawyers call a “*malus animus*”
Conduct like this by no means comprehends:
Revenge in person’s certainly no virtue,
But then ‘tis not *my* fault, if *others* hurt you.²²

To offset the image of implacable self-righteousness she had presented to the world during the separation contest and its aftermath, Lady Byron, for the rest of her life, strove to project herself as a being dominated by feeling. Even her God was “all-loving,” she informed a friend. Her prevailing weakness, she told her journal, was that she “ascribed to the actions of others motives of a loftier or less worldly nature than really existed.”²³ Only her ineluctable adherence to Truth, which she invariably judged most beneficial to the sinner she was hoping to forgive at the moment, prevented her from absolutely abandoning all principle, so overwhelming was her “passionate devotedness.”

She had now achieved ascendancy over almost her entire circle of family and friends, and over none was her power more absolute than over her daughter. But the older Ada grew, the more delicate and difficult her task became, and the more subtle and adroit her efforts needed to be. With a daughter to rear, with the necessity as well as the inclination to lead a life of unblemished virtue, and with the fruits of her reflections on Byron's mismanaged youth, it was only to be expected that she should develop an interest in education and turn to good works.

The establishment of village schools was a favorite form of charity among the ladies of the gentry. In them poor and orphaned children were trained, usually in farm work if boys and in the domestic arts if girls. The schools thus provided not only evidence of upper-class responsibility but a pool of trained servants and laborers as well.

Lady Byron founded such a school in 1818, in the environs of her parents' house at Seaham. For advice about this project she turned to her old tutor Mr. Friend, and also mentioned her other educational undertaking. "My daughter is a happy and intelligent child, just beginning to learn her letters—I have given her this occupation, not so much for the sake of early acquirement, as to fix her attention, which from the activity of her imagination is rather difficult."²⁴

Mr. Friend did not object to the hobbling of imagination, but brushed aside the subterfuge and responded to her boasting in his usual jocular manner. "I am glad to hear so good an account of yourself & your little one. As to the latter, do not be in any hurry. My eldest little girl gave alarming signs of being a prodigy, but I so effectually counteracted them that her mother began in her turn to be alarmed when she was between six and seven years old lest she should be backward in her learning."²⁵ He was referring to his daughter Sophia, who was to become one of Lady Byron's most slavishly devoted friends and a detractor of Ada's. His correspondent, however, was not to be deterred by his example.

At the recommendation of Lord Brougham, she became interested in the school run by Emanuel de Fellenberg at Hofwyl, Switzerland; she was so impressed that she wrote a paper on its history. The Fellenberg system of "learning by action" was an offshoot of Pestalozzi's techniques for schooling the vagabond orphans of the Napoleonic wars. Fellenberg, however, ran a two-tiered school. One was for poor boys, who learned not only agricultural work but various kinds of practical crafts as well, such as carpentry, mechanics, and leatherwork, all of which they practiced on the Fellenberg estate. The other, "higher" school was for the sons of the well-to-do. In their case, "action" was

afforded by "military exercises, swimming, riding, pedestrian excursions, skating, gardening, turning and other mechanical operations." If yet more action seemed warranted, Lady Byron continued,

Pupils of the upper school who were found to require physical strengthening or, as was the case with many, bodily fatigue, were sent for a time to field-labour with the lower school, a proceeding which in both cases acted as a wholesome medicine; whilst by the boys themselves, getting up at three o'clock in the morning to earn a breakfast with a thrashing-flail was regarded as one of the greatest pleasures. The sons of the wealthy thus learnt to respect labour in the persons of the pupils of the poor school; whilst on the other hand the poor learnt to view their richer companions, not as enemies, but as sympathising friends.²⁶

The regime was, she felt, the first step toward solving the problem of "how the leading classes of society, those who employ labour, could be trained to recognize the duty incumbent on them to educate the working-class and elevate them morally in the same degree as they avail themselves of their labour to increase their own property."²⁷

The schools were for boys only, since for girls social considerations always overrode educational ones, and upper-class girls were carefully guarded against any form of sexual or social mixing. Later, Lady Byron sent one of her grandsons to Hofwyl for a time, but he was not permitted to mix with even the boys of the "upper" school. She remained firmly convinced that boys' schools were breeding grounds for homosexuality and that Byron had been depraved at Harrow. The "industrial" school she founded near her home at Ealing Grove was to be for poor boys alone.

Of course there was never any question of sending Ada to a school, although some of the "industrial" techniques were adapted for her. She learned to sew, early and well. Later, in a gesture of affection and respect, she made one of those beribboned caps that nineteenth-century matrons wore indoors for her friend and mentor, Mary Somerville; and even as countess, she made her own petticoats.

In a notebook kept to record Ada's progress during her sixth year, written tellingly in Ada's name, Lady Byron declared her determination to teach Ada herself, with only occasional assistance, to avoid "the evil of Governesses." Another notebook, however, reveals the experiences of one governess who was hired during this same period and lasted only eight weeks. The task of poor Miss Lamont could not have been an easy one. At five and a half, Ada's schedule already covered "lessons in the morning in arithmetic, grammar, spelling, reading,

music, each no more than a quarter of an hour long—after dinner, geography, drawing, french, music, reading, all performed with alacrity and docility.”²⁸ At least at first. As the record continued, it appeared the little pupil sometimes showed signs of restlessness. This is scarcely surprising when it transpires that she was forced to spend part of the time reclining on a board, during which the lessons continued in the form of questions and answers. Outside of lessons, there were periods when she was required by her mother to lie perfectly still.

For good behavior and performance Ada was rewarded with “tickets,” which might still be withdrawn for subsequent failure or disobedience. When she had accumulated a sufficiency of tickets, they were exchanged for some suitable prize, such as a book or picture. Nevertheless, the notebook kept on her behalf stresses that she was supposed to be working chiefly for the joy of pleasing her mother:

I want to please Mama very much, that she & I may be happy together. . . . Geography amuses me very much. . . . The French has not interested so much as some others—and one night I was rather foolish in saying that I did not like arithmetic & to learn figures, when I did—I was not thinking quite what I was about. The sums can be done better, if I tried, than they are. The lying down might be done better, & I might lay quite still & never move.²⁹

Miss Lamont’s journal confirms the stringency of the requirements to lie still and please Mama. If she so much as moved her fingers, her hands were encased in black bags.

. . . before Lady Byron she was immediately subdued—submitted to have the finger bags put on, and went into confinement into a closet for half an hour. . . . Lady Byron went to Leicester at 2 o’clock—during her absence, Ada never, I believe for a moment, lost sight of the stimulus of doing well that she might give pleasure to her mamma on her return by a good report.

It must be remembered that Miss Lamont’s journal was written for inspection by Lady Byron, so her account of Ada’s motives in her mother’s absence need not be taken too seriously. More often, and distractingly, Mamma was present during the lessons.

In the evening, on occasion of being reproved for some slight shew of carelessness at her work, Ada, feeling some resentment arise, was going to reply—when, immediately checking herself, she went up to her mamma, and in a whisper said—“Give me some good advice.”

On occasion Mamma could check exuberance as readily as resentment:

In the evening while her mamma was at tea, Ada amusing herself by singing, presently exclaimed, "I think mamma I have a very good voice I shall be able to sing better than you." . . . Lady Byron calling her said in an impressive manner "Ada did you give yourself your voice?" to which she replied "O I understand Mamma, we will talk of that when I am going to bed."³⁰

Miss Lamont was dismissed, as Lady Byron explained to the lady who had recommended her, because she had not the strength and firmness to motivate her charge by only "a sense of duty, combined with the hope of approbation from those she loves."³¹ Instead, the unfortunate governess often fell back on "complex methods," such as coaxing and persuasion.

It was right after the departure of Miss Lamont that Ada made the inevitable inquiry about her father, apparently for the first time. As Lady Byron noted the occasion, "Ada asked me today if Grandpapa & Papa were the same. I said no, that they were different kinds of relations. She replied, 'then mine's not a Papa?' I said I would explain to her more about that when she was older. Her mind did not appear to dwell on the subject."³² By a lucky chance, Lady Byron's account may be compared with Ada's own version of this or a similar incident, which was recorded by Mary Somerville's son, Woronzow Greig, who claimed to have become Ada's most intimate confidant. "The confidence she reposed in me," he said, "was very much greater than a woman could safely repose in anyone, and thus my acquaintance with her secret history was greater than even if I had been her lover, as she told me many things which she would not have ventured to communicate to one who stood in that relation to her." According to Greig,

Adas feelings toward her mother were more akin to awe and admiration than love and affection. The familiarity of mother and daughter never subsisted between them, there was always a degree of repulsion and distrust altho they were proud of each other. . . . Moreover Ada once when she was very young while walking in the garden with her mother said "Mamma how is it that other little girls have got Papas and I have none." Lady Byron prohibited her daughter in such a fearfully stern and threatening manner from ever speaking to her again upon the subject, that the poor girl shrank within herself and as she more than once told me acquired a feeling of dread toward her mother that continued till the day of her death.³³

It is somewhat surprising to find that, notwithstanding her mother's system of education, Ada retained a love of learning almost throughout her life; she even came to prefer mathematics to geography. It was most fortunate, too, because before long she was visited by the first of a series of incapacitating illnesses that only exacerbated the maternal and social restrictions already burdening her short existence.

Like Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and Elizabeth Barrett, Lady Byron was one of the great nineteenth-century invalids whose physical frailties, while often real enough, gained them sympathy and exempted them from so many of the tedious and bothersome duties expected of all women, yet miraculously left them able to pursue activities that posterity agreed were more valuable. Lady Byron's illnesses were of such a nature as not to prevent her traveling, or organizing and supervising both philanthropies and family concerns. Like Ada, Lady Byron had started out as a healthy and active child, but she was often and progressively ill from late adolescence. Indeed, to read her descriptions of her diet and the preparations with which she dosed herself is to wonder that she remained as resilient as she did and that she survived to the age of sixty-eight. Ada's illnesses were never to be so convenient.

Vegetables were not then a well-regarded source of nourishment for the upper classes, and fruit was actually considered harmful to children. At one point Lady Byron announced that she ate "*nothing but meat eggs and biscuits*"; her appetite for mutton was legendary. When headaches, indigestion, and "bilious attacks" followed, the medical men she consulted often prescribed preparations of metallic salts, such as antimony and zinc, that could be quite toxic. Both doctors and patients were much given to the use of emetics, laxatives, and purgatives, which Lady Byron referred to as "opening medicine." Letters were peppered with prescriptions, traded back and forth as freely as gossip. In truth, doctors knew little more than their patients, and the gentry used their authoritative status to dose their servants as well as themselves and each other. In one letter Lady Byron proudly announced that she had saved her maid's life "by a timely dose of Castor Oil when she was in danger of an inflammation in her bowels."³⁴

Lady Byron, and the legions of physicians she consulted, believed even more firmly in the benefits of bleeding. This staple of "heroic" medicine had enjoyed waves of popularity for many centuries. Any condition that was accompanied by fever, swelling, or excitement was thought to be caused by an excess of blood, which carried impurities, either in the affected area or throughout the body. Bloodletting was

considered an appropriate treatment even for hemorrhages; the logic of this apparently consisted in the belief that the hemorrhage was the body's attempt to rid itself of excess blood and poisons. From the doctor's point of view, too, bleeding had the desirable effect of "lowering" the patient, rendering him relaxed and quiet, and so confirming his expectations of improvement.

Bleeding could be accomplished in a number of ways: by lancing, cupping, or the use of leeches. Lady Byron was very fond of the latter form of treatment. In one letter she told Ada triumphantly, "I am rather better for a horrid *mouthful* of Leeches this morning."³⁵ They could be applied almost anywhere. Many conditions, when they afflicted women, were held to be somehow connected with the reproductive organs, and a number of derangements, both physical and mental, were attributed to sexual excitation, which, correctly, was thought to result in the sexual organs becoming engorged with blood. When Ada was four, for example, Lady Byron confided to her mother that her doctor was "positive that all my complaints are dependent upon a disorder of the womb, that has existed ever since Ada's birth. . . . The vessels in that region are in consequence overloaded and will require continual depletion by cupping and leeches."³⁶ The remedy was not pursued vigorously enough to meet her demanding physiology, and many years later, when Ada, now a married woman, commented on her mother's lack of physical exercise, she explained (asking Ada to burn her letter) that "in consequence of the frustration of *one* of the purposes of my existence, a congestion took place in one set of organs which made exercise most mischievous & likely to induce a fatal disease."³⁷ Sufficient bleeding at the right time, she thought, could have prevented this perilous condition.

Under the supervision of a mother who adhered to such dietary and medical regimes, it is not surprising that Ada early developed a delicate stomach, though this may have been unconnected with her later agonizing attacks of "gastritis." (For a discussion of Ada's lifelong health problems, see the Appendix.) Then, in her eighth year, she began to suffer from severe headaches that affected her eyesight, or at least hindered her reading, for several more months. Since headaches were attributed, once more correctly, to dilated blood vessels in the head, bleeding—from which even children were not exempted—was the treatment of choice. When Byron, then in Greece, received the news that his daughter was afflicted with "blood to the head," he at once made the usual connection, and wrote back:

Perhaps she will get quite well when she arrives at womanhood . . . if she is of so sanguine a habit, it is probable that she may attain to

that period earlier than is usual in our colder climate;—in Italy and the East—it sometimes occurs at twelve—or even earlier—I knew an instance in a noble Italian house—at ten. . . . I cannot help thinking that the determination of blood to the head so early unassisted may have some connection with a similar tendency to earlier maturity.³⁸

His use of the word “sanguine” and Lady Byron’s references to her “bilious attacks” show that medical thought still bore traces of the ancient Greek humoral theory. This held that the body contained four fluids, or humors, that corresponded to the four elements of which the universe was composed. The humors—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—determined by their relative proportions not only health and sickness but also the predominance of certain personality traits. The humoral theory was both a physical and a psychological system, an attempt to connect mind and body. There were other such theories to come into Ada’s life.

Before the end of her childhood Ada was well acquainted with discomfort, pain, and physical restraint; another frequent visitor was death. Her effusive and affectionate grandmother died when she was six, and the mysterious Papa two years later (bled to death by his own physicians, as it happens). In the following year Grandpapa died. Ada’s sadness and bewilderment in this period are revealed in two letters she wrote to a younger cousin, the son of the man who inherited her father’s title. Calling the boy “Brother,” she fantasized their loving and comforting each other when all the adults had departed.³⁹

The deaths in the family, on the other hand, greatly enhanced Lady Byron’s income and independence. With her ostentatiously unostentatious manner of living, she clearly did not need all of her revenues, so she handed her jointure to the new Lord Byron, who had received his peerage denuded of the family estates. Although Jane Austen taught us that ten thousand pounds a year was as good as a lord, many lords had to make do with considerably less. Still, it was considered shameful, and possibly degrading to his rank, for a nobleman to be unable to maintain a minimally aristocratic lifestyle. Byron had willed his money—what remained after the amount that yielded his widow’s jointure—to Augusta, who, with her large and feckless family, needed it just as badly as the new Lord. But Annabella was finding out just how effective a financial obligation could be in securing devotedly loyal friends, and she harbored a jealousy and resentment toward Augusta that could barely be concealed by pious moralism.

The removal of her husband and ailing parents also freed her to make a grand tour of the Continent, taking Ada with her; they remained abroad for two years. Only a few months after they returned, Ada

came down with measles, followed by serious complications. She was then thirteen, a significant age. Since her return she had been pursuing an interest in astronomy, corresponding with Mr. Frend and his daughter Sophia about it. On 27 May 1829, Mr. Frend wrote to inquire of Lady Byron:

How does Miss B. come on with her astronomy. The next month toward the end will exhibit Jupiter to her to great advantage & at a reasonable hour. I hope you have a good telescope & it will be an amusing exercise to sketch the planet with his moons & observe the variation of their positions in succeeding nights. She may be fortunate enough to witness a few eclipses & occultations but I would not consult books on the occasion. She may make tolerable guesses at the approaching phenomena & verify them by her own observations.⁴⁰

But Ada was to enjoy no such starry amusements. On 29 June Lady Byron explained her delay in replying by “the serious anxiety which I have had reason to feel on Ada’s account for the last two months. . . . Ada has been and still is in a perfectly helpless state; the loss of all power to walk or stand having followed other effects of the measles, and too rapid growth.—There is not, I am assured, any danger in her present disabled state, but as it deprives her of the pursuits of mind, as well as of active employment, my thoughts & time are more than usually occupied by her.”⁴¹

There are a number of possible causes of temporary paralysis of the legs. Most of them, however, do not persist for more than a few months if recovery is eventually to be as complete as it was in Ada’s case. The fact that her “disablement” stretched, with decreasing severity, over several years, ending only when she was considered of marriageable age, suggests that her recovery might actually have been delayed by the prolonged and stringent bed rest—which itself can weaken muscle tone—to which she was subjected in addition to the other debilitating treatments favored by Lady Byron.

A series of letters written by Ada to a friend of her mother’s a year after the onset of her illness shows that she was permitted to sit up for only half an hour a day, a period that was increased to an hour toward the end of the summer. She admitted her “low spirits,” but at least her schoolwork had been resumed—often again in a reclining position. By the autumn of 1831, however, she was walking on crutches and optimistically seeking advice on building a bridle path. At last, in September 1832, a letter from her mother’s former maid, Mrs. Clermont, bore congratulations on her walking without “supporters,” though oddly enough her mother had noted she was able to do this,

as long as she had weights in her hands, some six months previously, indicating that her problem was at least partly one of balance. For some time after even this date, she was often weak and giddy.

During the period when she was still on crutches, the first reference to a new and fashionable interest of Lady Byron's appears in their correspondence. It occurs in response to a suggestion by Lady Byron that Ada should take the carriage into London, where her mother was then visiting a friend. Ada was curiously reluctant to quit her solitude and her studies, worrying over what might happen to her Latin verbs as a result of the interruption. Finally she asked, "have you a bedroom amongst your ground floor apartments? If not it might be rather awkward for me.—Having now stated all the fors and againsts which occur to my constructive organs, I leave it to your judgment."⁴²

Lady Byron must have been an early convert to phrenology; but once converted, she ceased to be the plaything of fashion. Although one of its founders, Spurzheim, had crossed the Channel in 1814 to lecture to the benighted Britons, the London Phrenological Society was not established until 1824; it had taken a decade to catch on. Like the ancient humoral system, phrenology was an attempt to relate body—or in this case, brain—to mind. The "functions" of the brain were classified in terms of a set of behavioral "faculties," and attempts were made to relate these faculties to the structure of the brain as it appeared to the anatomists of the day. Some "organ" of the brain was supposed to give rise to each faculty, or behavioral disposition. Just how many faculties there were, and their exact locations in the head, were matters of some dispute. Among the faculties were included such "feelings and propensities" as "combativeness," "constructiveness," "destructiveness," and "acquisitiveness." Then there were faculties and associated organs for "sentiments," such as "veneration," "hope," "ideality," "conscientiousness." Still another broad class were the "knowing faculties," including "individuality," "form," "size," "weight," and "color." Finally there were "reflective faculties," such as "comparison," "wit," "causality," and "imitation." Only the less noble and desirable of the faculties were shared with the lower animals. The organs corresponding to these faculties in particular individuals could be large or small, giving rise to greater or smaller corresponding dispositions. The shape of the skull, being molded around the protuberances beneath, was therefore affected by the sizes of the various organs. Thus, a person with a large organ of veneration could be identified by phrenologists, not by his deeds of piety and devotion, but by the bump on his head over the location of the enlarged organ.

One of the many memoirists of the period recorded a conversation with a prominent phrenologist named Deville:

He told . . . of an anonymous lady whom he had to caution against sensitiveness to the opinion of others. Some years afterwards she came again and brought her daughter, who, when finished, was sent into another room, and the lady consulted him upon her own cranium. He found the sensitiveness so fearfully increased as almost to require medical treatment. He afterwards met her at a party, when she introduced herself as Lady Byron. Her third visit to him was made whilst Moore's *Life of her husband* was being published, and, in accordance with his prescription, she had not allowed herself to read it.⁴³

Moore's *Life, Letters, and Journals of Lord Byron* was published in two volumes in 1830 and 1831, by which time Lady Byron had been consulting phrenologists for a number of years. Deville may have been correct in his conclusion, from measuring the bumps on her head, that she was sensitive to public opinion. He was wrong, however, about her not having read Moore's book; she even published a pamphlet to register her objections to it, though it was supposedly printed for private circulation only. Moore offered to include it with his second volume.

Most phrenologists were doctors; like psychoanalysis, however, it was a game that any amateur could play. Phrenology had social and religious, as well as medical and scientific, implications. Although the bumps and their underlying organs were innate, proper training and redirection could achieve compensatory enlargement or diminution within limits; hence, phrenology encouraged a compassionate sternness on the part of "governors": parents, teachers, employers, jailers, and madhouse keepers. Phrenology presented a kind of smorgasbord of progressive but not revolutionary ideas, from which so strong-minded and opinionated a woman as Lady Byron could pick and choose those she found congenial. It was perfectly suited to provide the final touch of authority to her judgments and pronouncements upon others.

The advice and exhortations in her letters to Ada were sprinkled with phrenological terms. "I want to see the Bird [Ada] to raise its bump of Self-esteem a little—I am sure it is morbidly sensitive," she wrote at one point.⁴⁴ At other times she felt Ada's self-esteem was entirely too high. Ada soon adopted the phrenological vocabulary, but her attitude toward the entire system was as fluctuating and ambivalent as her other associations with her mother. Her scientific bent led her not only to check phrenological beliefs against the opinions of the

men of science of her acquaintance, but also to test the diagnostic powers of individual phrenologists. The skeptical Babbage was induced to undergo several phrenological examinations, the results of which Ada preserved. Her side of the correspondence became at times a running debate that challenged Lady Byron's certainty in one of the few areas Ada felt permitted to question. In February 1841, for example, she wrote asking if her mother's faith were at all shaken by a recently published critical book. Lady Byron replied in true form: "I may say I have read nothing to alter my conclusions about the *human* head—it is the application of the *same* principles to *Animals* which appears to me to be proved fallacious."⁴⁵

The following month Ada wrote again, this time describing a visit that she, her husband, and a friend had paid that same Deville who had pronounced Lady Byron so morbidly sensitive years before. They had gone incognito, said Ada, and "it was very clear that he thought *much* the most highly of Sir G. Wilkinson, amongst the three." It was a sign of the success of their incognito, as well as a point against Deville's discernment, that he should have been more impressed with a disguised explorer and author than with an unknown earl and countess. Ada continued,

I think he failed with me in several points. He hit off one characteristic very cleverly & accurately, viz: my extreme *pain* & mortification at the slightest disparagement from others, & the tendency to *exaggerate* & *magnify* the circumstances to a remarkable extent—He dwelt very much on the predominance of the *Sentiments* over everything else in me. Now this is wrong. *Intellect* has at least an even share, if it does not carry the day, which I think it does. He said that Combativeness, Destructiveness, Self-Esteem, Hope, Order & Time, bear *no proportion* at all to the rest of the head; & that but for the Firmness, Conscientiousness & Causality the character would be a weak one.—Can we get phrenologised at Paris by the great man there?⁴⁶

Apparently Deville had early discovered that he could invariably impress his female clients by capitalizing on the social insecurity, the vulnerability to gossip, and the heightened self-consciousness from which genteel women suffered so agonizingly. The myth that Ada's overriding mode of perception and response was intellectual—in contrast to her mother, who was "all feeling"—was already well established when this exchange took place, at a time when phrenology was becoming merged with mesmerism, which in due course became even more of a battlefield between them.

Ada had been declared far enough recovered to enter the world at the usual time—the first London season after she turned seventeen. It was a vital rite of passage for young ladies: as soon as they had made their bows at the Queen's Drawing Room, they were of an age to marry. Exercising her prominent organ of intellect, Ada also celebrated the occasion by drawing up a document in which she attempted to explain to her mother her own views on the freedoms that parents should permit their mature offspring. It is fascinating to compare it with Annabella's declaration of her reasons for leaving her parents to hasten to London on her own.

The principle point on which I differ from you is "Your being constituted my guardian by God *forever*." "Honour thy father & thy mother," is an injunction I never have considered to apply to an age beyond childhood or the first years of youth, in the sense at least of *obeying* them. Every year of a child's life, I consider that the claim of the parent to that child's *obedience*, diminishes. After a child grows up, I conceive the parent who has brought up that child to the best of their ability, to have a claim to his or her gratitude. . . . But I cannot consider that the parent has any right to direct the child or to expect obedience in such things as concern *the child only*. . . . I consider your only claim to my obedience to be that given *by law*, and that you have no *natural* right to expect it after childhood. . . . Till 21, the law gives you a power of enforcing obedience on all points; but at that time I consider your power and your claim to cease on all such points as concern *me alone*, though I conceive your claim to my attention, and consideration of *your* convenience & comfort, rather to increase than diminish with years. . . . I consider that the law gives you the power of enforcing it, beyond the age when you have a natural right to do so.⁴⁷

If Ada hoped to clear the air and bring her mother to an understanding of her point of view in this way, she was bound to be disappointed. In addition to the moral pressure Lady Byron herself could bring to bear on any attempt at independence, she did not hesitate to confide in a circle of sympathizing friends, who in turn did not hesitate to scold and lecture Ada as soon as she exhibited any defect in veneration. It is no wonder that Ada despaired of "conversational litigation," as her mother called it (and who should know better?), to resort to a more active form of rebellion.

Because what happened was considered so shameful as possibly to affect Ada's marriageability, Lady Byron and her friends referred to the event only in the most oblique terms. The one explicit account that survives is Ada's own, and that at second hand. It appears in the memoir left by her confidant, Woronzow Greig, among his own family

papers. After presenting her pedigree (a subject in which he took a special interest), his reminiscences become much more personal, and he offers a vivid picture of Ada in her teens.

My first recollection of Ada Byron about 1832 or 3 [1833 or 4 crossed out] is when as a young girl she was a visitor at the house of my mother at the Royal College Chelsea . . . and as she had even in those early years a decided taste for science which was much approved by Lady Noel Byron she took every opportunity of cultivating mothers acquaintance. Ada was then rather stout and inclined to be clumsy, without colour and in delicate health. She used to lie a great deal in a horizontal position, and she was subject to fits of giddiness when she looked down from any height. She seemed to be amiable and unaffected. As might be expected at this early period of life she had not much conversation. She was reserved and shy, with a good deal of pride and not a little selfishness which disclosed itself with her advancing years. Her moral courage was remarkable and her determination of character most pronounced.⁴⁸

Though he mentions Ada's propensity to dizziness and fatigue, Greig makes no mention of her being on crutches, so the acquaintance is far more likely to have been formed in one of the later, crossed out, years than in 1832; probably, from the evidence of Ada's surviving letters, it was early in 1834. His description of her appearance agrees well with one left by her father's old friend, John Cam Hobhouse, who met her in February 1834 and recorded in his diary, "she is a large coarse-skinned young woman. . . . I was exceedingly disappointed." Greig attributed her early taciturnity to the demure behavior of the well-brought-up maiden, but his own account suggests another cause.

At this time Lady N. Byron was residing at Fordhook in Middlesex, and her most intimate friends were the late Miss Doyle, Miss Montgomery and Miss Carr the sister-in-law of Dr. Lushington and now living with them [that is, Miss Carr, at the time of writing, was living in Dr. Lushington's household]. These three ladies were constantly with Lady Byron who was entirely led by them, and as her daughter informed me they took the most unwarrantable liberties with Lady Byron and interfered in the most unjustifiable manner between mother and daughter. This annoyed Ada so much that she gave them the nickname of the three Furies which so far as appearances went was not unwarrantable as the ladies in question had all passed their premiere jeunesse and none of them was remarkable for good looks. . . .

As Ada grew older the interference of these ladies became more insufferable, but every attempt to resist it was repulsed by Lady Byron.

A short time before my family became acquainted with Lady Byron and her daughter, the former had engaged the services of a young man the son of some humble friend to come for a few hours daily to assist her daughters studies. As might have been foreseen a feeling of tenderness soon sprang up between these young people. It was not observed at first either by Lady Byron or her three friends. But Ada was reprimanded for chattering with her young master instead of attending to her studies. To this she paid no regard, and in consequence she was ordered to leave the room on one occasion by a "Fury." She did so unwillingly and in a state of high indignation. In the course of a few minutes she returned, and in pretence of carrying away some of the books, she managed to place in the young mans hands a slip of paper appointing an assignation at midnight in one of the outhouses.

The assignation took place and Ada informed me that matters went as far as they possible could without connexion being actually completed. My remark upon her telling me this was this youth must have been more or less than most.

In Greig's draft there is a carat after the word "without" in the last paragraph quoted, and the words "complete penetration" appear above the line, lightly crossed out. Perhaps he felt such minute specificity would convince his intended readers of his good information, but was already becoming uncertain of the tastefulness of the whole enterprise. The last sentence, conveying the Victorian gentleman's mixture of admiration and contempt for a man who had the opportunity of completing a seduction but refrained from doing so, is the first of a number of revealing intrusions into his narrative. Following this witty comment, his story plunges ahead:

After this her feelings toward the young man naturally became stronger and more uncontrollable. At length the mothers eyes were opened and the young mans visits were discontinued. Driven to madness by disappointment and indignation at the conduct of the Furies, Ada fled from her mothers house to the arms of her lover who was residing at no great distance with his relations Lady B' humble friends. They received her with dismay and took the earliest opportunity of returning her to her mother before the escapade was known. The matter was hushed up, and the only persons cognizant of it besides the mother and friends was myself—who was informed of it by Ada, and Lovelace to whom Lady B. communicated the fact before her [Ada's] marriage. . . . To what extent she herself was cognizant or enlightened him I know not. But I suspect neither knew all the events.

Just when, for whom, and for what purpose this curious account was prepared can only be a matter of speculation. From the surviving

correspondence between Ada and Greig, it does not seem likely that she made these confessions before the mid-1840s. From internal evidence, his account was written in the 1850s, possibly soon after her death—in other words, less than a decade after he heard the story. A regret expressed in another part of this memoir that he had failed to take down most of her early reminiscences suggests that he might even have made note of this one. In any case, it is clear from the unflattering comments on Ada and “Lady B.” as well as the comments that reveal much about his own character, that he meant his account to be both frank and full.

The same cannot be said for another account that must refer to the same episode, that of Sophia De Morgan, Mr. Frend’s daughter, which was written more than forty years after the events. Mrs. De Morgan was asserting the intimacy of her own friendship with Lady Byron:

After a visit paid to us at Stoke Newington with her daughter when the little girl was about fourteen I saw Lady Byron oftener and in the year 1832 went to stay with her at Fordhook. . . . I became acquainted with her anxieties on her daughter’s account, & on one or two occasions had it in my power to prevent the consequences of Miss B’s heedlessness & imprudence. I do not think this matter need be further entered into. There was I hope, no *real* misconduct at that time and an open scandal was prevented but it was very evident that the daughter who inherited many of her father’s peculiarities also inherited his tendencies. . . . as I said before these occurred when Miss B was only fourteen or fifteen & were I believe simply imprudence.⁴⁹

Mrs. De Morgan’s memory is clearly failing here. Ada could not have been fourteen or fifteen when she attempted to elope, since at those ages she was flat on her back or on crutches, and she and her mother did not yet live at Fordhook, whither they moved in 1832. Nevertheless, she does seem to be referring to the same events as Greig when she hopes there was “no *real* misconduct,” an unmistakable allusion to sexual activity. Now, Mrs. De Morgan, or Miss Frend, as she was then, was one of Lady Byron’s confidants in the matter of Byron’s incest; her statement here was given at the request of Lady Byron’s grandson, who was busily gathering evidence upon just this point. She was not afterward in the circle of real intimates; a letter to Ada from her mother, many years later, mentions evading Mrs. De Morgan’s prying questions on one occasion, perhaps after the discovery that she was in inveterate and malicious gossip where Ada’s affairs were concerned. So the fact that she knew of Ada’s elopement and might even have

been involved in “preventing the consequences” suggests that she and her father might have been among the “humble friends” mentioned by Greig and that Ada’s young lover was some connection of theirs. The Friends, if not exactly humble, were definitely middle-class.

In any case, Ada was returned, humiliated, and subjected to many lectures and scoldings from her mother, the Furies, Sophia Frend, and anyone else to whom Lady Byron cared to communicate her anxieties. Her spirit was broken, temporarily at least; she pronounced herself chastened and determined to mend her ways. Yet her season in London had already opened new doors through which she glimpsed new possibilities of freedom. She declared she would not marry until she had enjoyed the independence of coming of age; and she had already met Charles Babbage, whose influence, Greig declared, “eventually did her much harm.”