**Byron and Austen: Romance and Reality**  by: Doucet Devin Fischer

One might hope to report concerning Byron and Jane Austen that he had told Lady Holland that he admired Sense and Sensibility; or that he had asked Lady Melbourne to save him from his incestuous relationship with Augusta Leigh by finding him a wife like Elizabeth Bennet; or that he had wished out loud when Lady Caroline Lamb published her expose of their romance that she were a little more like Fanny Price. It would be wonderful to discover among some scribbled notes on the drafts of Don Juan an admission that his send-up of Gothic conventions in Canto XVI owed something to Northanger Abbey. It would be even better to find that he ranked Austen with Sir Walter Scott, his favorite novelist.

There is, however, little to support such literary wishful thinking. The only documentary justification for the placement of 'and' between the names of Byron and Jane Austen rests on a letter that John Murray wrote to his most famous author about six weeks after Austen's death in December 1817. 'My hands are quite full,' Murray announced; 'I am preparing ... two new novels, left by Miss Austen, the ingenious author of "Pride and Prejudice". (1) Is Murray talking about a book which Byron read, or about an author whom Byron knew? Or, rather, is Byron's publisher merely engaging in shop-talk regarding a novelist whose works Byron may have heard of from Caroline Lamb, Annabella Milbanke, Lady Bessborough, William Gifford, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, or someone else in the literary, social, and political circles he frequented during his years of fame in London? (2) Murray's letter shows only that Byron had heard of Jane Austen. It is tempting to think that Byron read Pride and Prejudice and Emma (3) while he was still in England, or that John Murray sent him Persuasion and Northanger Abbey when he was living in Venice in 1818. Byron did, after all, boast to Thomas Moore that he had read more than 4,000 novels; (4) but the sales catalogues of his books mention none of Austen's works, nor does her name occur in his correspondence, in his poems, or in his prose notes.

There were, of course, intersections. Byron was, after all, only thirteen years younger than Austen, and died only seven years later than she did. The worlds of each, then, were formed by the French Revolution and the long wars of its Napoleonic aftermath. Byron's poems were often overtly political, and he chose to thicken the surface of his narratives with pointed topical references. Austen, too, allows contemporary history to darken her fictions. But she usually places in the background what Byron can situate in the foreground, because he was supported by the authority of inherited privilege relating both to gender and to genre. There is no doubt, however, that the lives of Austen's heroines are affected by the movements of army regiments in Pride and Prejudice, by the fortunes of naval officers in Persuasion, and by the moral and political complexities of British colonialism in Mansfield Park. Class and the restraints imposed by primogeniture circumscribed their lives as well.

Byron, of course, also understood the limits imposed by events and circumstances. His wry complaint that he himself had been more ravished than any one since the Trojan war (5) is more than a comic riff on his own passivity. Implicit in his assessment is the suggestion that power often lies outside the individual self. The placement of his heroes within his poetic structures serves to confirm the vision of self under siege as the example of Don Juan indicates. Juan discovers on Lambro's island, (and again in the sultan's palace where he is forced to cross-dress, and once more in the court of Catherine the Great, (6)) what it might be like to be a heroine, compelled to negotiate and often to feign compliance in a world made by and for those who hold power. While Byron's psychosexual organization and undeniable genius are probably most responsible for his insights, there can be little doubt that he learned a great deal from those 4,000 novels, many of which were written by women.

Byron may have written the poetic [romances](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=AONE&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R4&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=10&contentSet=GALE%7CA299637817&&docId=GALE|A299637817&docType=GALE&role=) that everyone read in Regency England, but he was also, like Austen, a superb satirist and realist who relied on irony to sharpen his focus on the passing scene. What I wish to consider here is Byron's and Austen's shared perspective on love and the marriage market in Regency England and the interesting fact that they resorted to a similar narrative strategy when dealing with these subjects. Then I shall approach what Byron might have thought of Jane Austen by considering his ambivalent feelings about the Bluestockings whom he encountered everywhere when he awoke to find himself famous after Childe Harold's Pilgrimage was published in 1812.

First, as to their shared perspective. Byron could never have had Austen in mind when he argued that women had a basic allergy to satire. Certainly her novels would have posed a serious challenge to his conviction that a kind of 'Free masonry' among women promoted 'the illusion of the Sentiment ... which constitutes their sole empire ....' Her works would also have undermined his belief that 'all works which refer to the comedy of the passions ... & laugh at Sentimentalism ... of course are proscribed by the whole Sect'. (7)

The comedy of the passions is played out brilliantly in Austen's novels; and while Austen might, had she read Don Juan, have had reservations about its morals and some of its plot twists, surely she would have admired it. She, who was so practised in the use of the personal letter to expose character and advance plot--one need only consider the deployment of the epistolary effusions of the Reverend Mr. Collins--would have acknowledged Byron's skilled manipulation of the love letter that Juan receives from Julia, his first attachment. For Byron's loyal friend, John Cam Hobhouse, the letter Julia writes after the bedroom farce that precipitates Juan's flight from Spain recalled Stael's novel Corinne (1807) and her tract, De L'influence des Passions (1796). For Jerome McGann, Julia's letter is associated with a set of traditional ideas that had most memorably been given form in Byron's own times in Austen's Persuasion. (8) How Austen would have liked to find Anne Elliot yoked with Julia, an adulterous wife half the age of her husband who was himself the former lover of Juan's mother, is not something to explore here. That the letter represented the sentiments of a young woman like Julia--or, for example, one resembling Mansfield Park's spoiled, morally unimaginative Maria Bertram--Austen would probably have conceded. The crucial portion of Julia's letter reads:

 "Man's love is of his life a thing apart,

 'Tis woman's whole existence; man may range

 The court, camp, church, the vessel, and the mart,

 Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange

 Pride, fame, ambition, to fill up his heart,

 And few there are whom these can not estrange;

 Man has all these resources, we but one,

 To love again, and be again undone." (I, 194).

Austen resisted these sentiments, but she knew well that women's chances were limited and that their available choices, in love and in marriage, often decided their fates. Julia had, of course, not married for love any more than Maria Bertram had. Her story unfolds in a country whose shores are washed by the Mediterranean, but its outlines were familiar enough in the colder climate of Regency England, where a man's position and property, or a woman's beauty, money, or blood, regulated their relative value on the marriage market. On the margins of Austen's fictions are a series of marriages wrecked by just these considerations. The charms of young love do little to dispel the clouds that hang over the conjugal lives of the elder Bennets and Bertrams in Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park; nor can the pleasures of a central romance plot conceal from a reader's view the sufferings that must have been endured by the wives of Sir Walter Elliot and General Tilney in Persuasion and Northanger Abbey.

The 'honey' in many unions, as Byron's punning rhyme in stanza 14 of Canto XII acknowledges, is often 'matri-money,' a currency basic to the narrative procedures in Austen's novels as well. Austen's awareness of the multiple ironies that Byron chose to compress into one clever pun is diffused throughout her fictions, and is reflected, for example, in her attention to the reduced circumstances of the Dashwoods in Sense and Sensibility, to the consequences of an entailed estate in Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion, to the question of an independent fortune in Emma, to the modest expectations of Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey, to the anomalous position of Fanny Price in Mansfield Park, and--above all--in Austen's relentless appraisal of the financial status of her heroines' prospective husbands.

Byron's pointed anatomy of the marriage market occurs most conspicuously in Don Juan. Juan has loved and been undone repeatedly by the time he reaches England in Canto X, and he has been successfully marketed as well, first when he was sold into the sultan's harem and then when he was forced into sexual service by Catherine the Great. Juan becomes a commodity again in London, and most particularly at Norman Abbey, the country seat of the Amundevilles. Byron's great world, which he defined as 'twice two thousand, for whom earth was made' (XIII.49.386), is no country village, but Juan's presence is felt along all the filaments of the social web just as is the appearance of an eligible man in an Austen novel. Byron's narrator informs us that:

 A young unmarried man, with a good name

 And fortune, has an awkward part to play:

 For good society is but a game,

 'The royal game of Goose,' as I may say,

 Where everybody has some separate aim,

 An end to answer, or a plan to lay (XII.58.457-62).

Juan, we are told further, is a 'bachelor--of arts, / And parts, and hearts: he danced and sung, and had / An air as sentimental as Mozart's / Softest of melodies' (XI.47.369-72). In addition, we find out that 'Daughters admired his dress, and pious mothers / Enquired his income, and if he had brothers' (XI.48.383-84).

Juan's hostess, Lady Adeline Amundeville, described as the 'fair most fatal Juan ever met' (XIII. 12.3) is strongly attracted to him. Her decision to find Juan a wife, given this circumstance, seems doomed to the same mixed success as the efforts at matchmaking made by Austen's Emma Woodhouse. Like Emma, Adeline has very little knowledge either of her own heart or other people's. Unlike Emma, however, whose intellectual good intentions extended only to making lists of the books she should read, Adeline possessed all the accomplishments a lady could wish for. She not only had 'a twilight tinge of Blue,' but she also 'could write rhymes, and compose more than she wrote; / Made epigrams occasionally too / Upon her friends, as everybody ought' (XVI.47.417-20). When her company gathers at breakfast after the appearance of the ghost that haunts Norman Abbey, she sings one of her own compositions about the spectral Black Friar, and accompanies herself on the harp. It is true that the narrator takes pains to assure his audience that Adeline is remote from 'that sublimer azure hue, / So much the present dye,' and was further redeemed by her admiration for the poetry of Byron's old favorite, Alexander Pope (XVI.47.421-24). Nevertheless, it seems likely that Adeline's 'tinge of "Blue"' was intended as a warning. The resemblances between Byron and the young Juan were sufficiently compelling to suggest that his hero might fall victim to an attraction as fatal as that his creator developed for Annabella Milbanke, pilloried first in the figure of Donna Inez in Canto I and then again in the character of Miss Millpond in Canto XV.

Adeline represents the last and most complete portrait in Byron's gallery of Blues. His complicated relationships with Bluestockings dated back more than a decade to the time when he was the reigning lion in the salons of Lady Holland and Lady Melbourne. Later he met an international set of literati: first, at Madame de Stael's home on Lake Geneva, and then at conversazioni in the palazzos of Countess Benzoni and Countess Albrizzi in Venice. The anxiety engendered in him by the women he met--and, what is more important, read intensified not only when they crossed the borders into traditionally masculine preserves but also as the level of their intellectual and literary accomplishments rose. His feelings are perhaps best articulated in the confession he made to Lady Blessington in 1823, when he admitted that he wanted 'a woman with talent enough to be able to understand and value mine, but not sufficient to be able to shine herself. Then, based on his own wry self-assessment, he made a generalization: 'All men with pretensions desire this, though few, if any, have the courage to avow it'. (9)

Byron displays his ambivalence toward women reading and women writing in his letters and journals as well as in his poems. As early as 1808, when he was only twenty, he told a friend that his mistress had 'only two faults, unpardonable in a woman,--she can read and write'. (10) Eleven years later he celebrated the illiteracy of his fierce mistress Margherita Cogni, because, as he told John Murray after the liaison ended, 'she could neither read nor write--and could not plague me with letters--except twice that she paid sixpence to a public scribe under the piazza--to make a letter for her--upon some occasion when I was ill and could not see her'. (11)

Byron's suspicions were, admittedly, well founded. He received dozens of unsolicited letters both in England and in Italy; and from Teresa Guiccioli, with whom he lived for more than four years before going off to fight in Greece, he received several hundred. (12) A survey of that correspondence and the written record of his relationships with Caroline Lamb, Annabella Milbanke, and Claire Clairmont reveal that he knew first hand the perils he spells out in Don Juan:

 The earth has nothing like a She epistle,

 And hardly heaven--because it never ends.

 I love the mystery of a female missal,

 Which, like a creed, ne'er says all it intends,

 But full of cunning as Ulysses' whistle,

 When he allured poor Dolon:--you had better

 Take care what you reply to such a letter. (XIII. 105.834-40).

Letters play no part in the lives of the pliant women shut up in the imprisoning harems of the East, where Byron set his early romances. A symbol of oppression to Mary Wollstonecraft and other advocates of women's rights, the harem produced few women like Gulnare, the problematic lover of Byron's Corsair, who was both empowered by speech and moved to action. Most heroines in the Turkish Tales are the hidden sisters of Leila, the secret love of Byron's Giaour, who suffered and died in silence when her body, enclosed in a sack, slid quietly beneath the waves. In these poems Byron effectively stills the female voice.

Later, it is true, Byron makes amends when he turns the conventions of his oriental romances inside out in Beppo, whose heroine is anything but silent. But even in this sunny poem, there is shade. Byron's narrator, like him a broken dandy on his travels, is driven--perhaps by Laura's extreme volubility--to a comic reminiscence about the virtue of women insulated from the dangers of the circulating library. In the harem, he notes, 'Blues' are unknown. Moslem women 'cannot read, and so don't lisp in criticism; / Nor write, and so they don't affect the muse; / Were never caught in epigram or witticism, / Have no romances, sermons, plays, reviews' (Beppo, st. 72, 11.569-72). (13)

Byron's attitude toward women who did 'affect the muse' is perhaps best explained by his mobility, a trait he shared with Lady Adeline (XVI.97.820). Like her, Byron was strongly subject to the force of immediate sensations, and was frequently victimized by his feelings at a particular moment. Moreover, he was an accomplished poseur, unable to resist the temptations his very wicked wit constantly placed in his way. Even a small sample of his opinions suggests how changeable he was, especially on the charged subject of women writing.

Of women poets, who posed the most immediate threat to Byron's own literary enterprise, he has little good to say. He dismissed Anna Seward as a mere 'scribbling woman' who wrote 'the most disgusting trash,' and has unkind words as well for Felicia Hemans, a popular and competitive contemporary, whom he derisively characterized as a 'female ... Tadpole of the Poet Turdsworth's'. (14) On the other hand, he respected the early tragedies of Joanna Baillie and had urged Edmund Kean to act in a revival of her play, De Montfort, when he served on the Sub-Committee of Management at Drury Lane. Several years later, when in 1821 he ordered Murray to stop sending him the new works of any but a select group of authors, she was the only woman who made his list of exceptions. (15)

As for women [novelists](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=AONE&userGroupName=lom_accessmich&tabID=T002&searchId=R4&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=10&contentSet=GALE%7CA299637817&&docId=GALE|A299637817&docType=GALE&role=), Byron thought Mary Shelley's Frankenstein 'a wonderful work for a Girl of nineteen--not nineteen indeed--at that time,' and praised the works of Elizabeth Inchbald. (16) And while the novels of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth (17) won only mixed reviews, he thought highly enough of Harriet Lee's Kruitzner to base his drama Werner upon it. (18) The woman Byron most sincerely admired for her genius and originality, however, was the novelist, critic, and cultural historian, Anne Louise Germaine Necker, Baronne de Stael-Holstein. Byron called Stael 'a woman by herself, [who] has done more than all the rest of them together, intellectually;--she ought to have been a man'. (19) Although he registered objections to her politics, her ego, and her volubility, noting that she 'writes octavos and talks folios,' (20) his very evident debts to her popular novel Corinne in the final canto of Childe Harold, as well as the long, generous personal tribute he appended in a note to the last segment of that poem, attest to his appreciation of her formidable talents and accomplishments.

Byron found Corinne itself troubling, to be sure, but his suspicions are really only another acknowledgement of Stael's genius. During his years with Teresa Guiccioli, for example, he constantly teased her about the shaping power that her favorite novel exercised over her imagination and accused her of thinking and writing 'a la De Stael'. (21) Even more telling was Byron's comic indictment of Corinne in a conversation with Lady Blessington. He claimed that he had told Stael that Corinne was a very dangerous production to put into the hands of young women, because it 'represented] all the virtuous characters ... as being dull, common-place, and tedious, [which] was a most insidious blow aimed at virtue, and calculated to throw it into the shade'. (22)

Byron could not have accused Austen of this crime, nor could he have brought her characters to the bar, arguing that they were more likely to seduce a girl than was his hero, Don Juan. Byron defended his epic as 'a satire on abuses of the present states of Society'. (23) Austen could justifiably make competitive claims for her novels, which legislated more subtly against Byron's familiar targets--hypocrisy, pretension, and cant. Could Byron have accused Austen of anything, had he left us a record of his opinion? Ambitious genius clearly unsettled him, and he reserved his most scathing criticism for women who looked beyond the lower slopes of Mount Parnassus. Here Austen might have been safe, because she observed the decorum appropriate to her gender when she chose her genre. Byron might also have been reassured by Austen's famous remark, so soothing to the more Promethean egos of epic bards and tragedians, about sticking to her 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory'. (24) It seems unlikely, however, that he would not have suspected that the keen intelligence, sharp wit, and elegant prose style that she displayed in her novels demanded that this piece of self-deprecation be read ironically. Austen did not limit herself to sentiment, the empire Byron considered women's own, and her examination of woman's place in man's world was in many ways subversively critical. Moreover, she ranged freely across the borders of sentiment into Byron's territory, satire. Such a transgressive mode placed Austen firmly among the company of the 'Blues'. Byron's own sentiments concerning this part of the literary elect are reflected in the wry commiseration extended by the narrator of Don Juan to the fathers, brothers, husbands, and lovers of women like Austen: 'But Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, / Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck'd you all?' (1.22.175-76). Byron's careful placement of the preposition 'of suggests his endorsement of existing social codes, which assumed the subordination of ladies to their lords. Not even the self-styled 'grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme' (XI.55.440), however, could still Austen's voice, which offers a persistent, teasing corrective to the presumptions and patriarchal assumptions of Byronic heroes. (25)

NOTES

(1.) Samuel Smiles, A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray (London: John Murray, 1891), II, 21; Janice Smith, 'My dear Mr. Murray ...' Byron Newsletter, 7 (1980-82), 7.

(2.) Some of these connections are mentioned by Jo Modert in an unpublished paper, 'Jane Austen, Lord Byron, and the Dustheaps of Biography'; see also B.C. Southam, Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 7-8.

(3.) Sir Walter Scott wrote a long, favorable review of Emma for the Quarterly Review in March 1816.

(4.) Thomas Moore, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with Notices of His Life (London: John Murray, 1830), I, 98.

(5.) Byron's Letters and Journals, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973-82), VI, 237.

(6.) See Cecil Lang, 'Narcissus Jilted: Byron, Don Juan, and the Biographical Imperative,' in Historical Studies and Literary Criticism, ed., introd., Jerome J. McGann (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 143-79.

(7.) Byron's Letters and Journals, VIII, 148.

(8.) Don Juan in Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works, ed, Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), V, 680. All quotations from Donjuan are cited from this edition.

(9.) Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron, ed., introd. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 110.

(10.) Byron's Letters and Journals, I, 161.

(11.) Byron's Letters and Journals, VI, 193-94; see also Doucet Devin Fischer, ' "Countesses and Cobblers' Wives": Byron's Venetian Mistresses,' in Shelley and his Circle, ed. Donald H. Reiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), VII, 198-205.

(12.) See, for example, George Paston and Peter Quennell, 'To Lord Byron': Feminine Profiles Based upon Unpublished Letters, 1807-1824 (London: John Murray, 1939); Iris Origo, The Last Attachment: The Story of Byron and Teresa Guiccioli as Told in Their Unpublished Letters and Other Family Papers (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949); Fischer, '"Countesses and Cobblers' Wives": Byron's Venetian Mistresses' and 'Teresa Guiccioli's Byron' in Shelley and his Circle, VII, 163-214, 373-487; see also volumes 'VII and following, where the archives of Teresa Guiccioli Gamba's letters are appearing.

(13.) Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), IV, 151. Further quotations from Beppo are from this edition.

(14.) Byron's Letters and Journals, II, 132; VII, 158.

(15.) Byron's Letters and Journals, VIII, 210, 219.

(16.) Byron's Letters and Journals, VI, 126; III, 236.

(17.) Byron's Letters and Journals, II, 143; IV, 86-87, 146; III, 48, 247; IV, 25.

(18.) Byron's Letters and Journals, X, 40, 55.

(19.) Byron's Letters and Journals, III, 227.

(20.) Byron's Letters and Journals, III, 207.

(21.) Byron's Letters and Journals, VIII. 242; see also VIII, 170, 213.

(22.) Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron, pp. 25-26.

(23.) Byron's Letters and Journals, X, 68.

(24.) Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), II, 469.

(25.) This paper originated as part of a program entitled 'His Lordship and a Lady: Lord Byron and Jane Austen--Intersections' sponsored jointly by the American Byron Society and the Jane Austen Society of New York on January 22, 1991. The other side of the question--Jane Austen's perspective on Byron--was explored in an unpublished talk given by Kathleen Fowler.

Fischer, Doucet Devin

Source Citation   (MLA 7th Edition)

Fischer, Doucet Devin. "Byron and Austen: romance and reality." *Byron Journal* 21.1 (1993): 71+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 19 May 2014.