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Augusta and Annabella: Their Influence on Byron's Poetry
by Diane Quinton

"He laughed at and pitied and adored and often affected to despise them." I Women--though contemptuous of them, Byron was nevertheless drawn to them. He had known many women, from his tempestuous mother, his ever constant half-sister Augusta, his learned wife, his erratic mistress Lady Caroline Lamb, to perhaps his most devoted mistress and friend Theresa Guiccioli; and his life was dominated by them. Having seen the capricious nature of the women in his own life, Byron became paradoxical about all women. His attitude varied from feeling that there was "something to me very softening in the presence of a woman--some strange influence, even if one is not in love with them--which I cannot at all account for"2 to believing women desirable as a means of pleasure but ethically and intellectually not to be taken seriously as "most of them have no character at all."3 He found them haughty yet humble, lacking in modesty yet reserved, impulsive yet calculating, and violent yet tender. It must be said to Byron's credit, though, that he believed the basis of women's contraries and faults lay not necessarily in themselves but in the conditions forced upon them by men and the corrupt society of the times.

With his life so interwoven with women and their vagaries, it is little wonder that Byron found in them and his experiences with them material for his poetry. One of the first women whose influence was felt in Byron's poetry was Augusta Leigh, his learned wife, his erratic mistress Lady Caroline Lamb, to perhaps his most devoted mistress and friend Theresa Guiccioli; and his life was dominated by them. Having seen the capricious nature of the women in his own life, Byron became paradoxical about all women. His attitude varied from feeling that there was "something to me very softening in the presence of a woman--some strange influence, even if one is not in love with them--which I cannot at all account for"2 to believing women desirable as a means of pleasure but ethically and intellectually not to be taken seriously as "most of them have no character at all."3 He found them haughty yet humble, lacking in modesty yet reserved, impulsive yet calculating, and violent yet tender. It must be said to Byron's credit, though, that he believed the basis of women's contraries and faults lay not necessarily in themselves but in the conditions forced upon them by men and the corrupt society of the times.

Though the day of my destiny's over,
And the star of my fate hath declined,
Thy soft heart refused to discover
The faults which so many could find;
Though thy soul with my grief was acquainted,
It shrunk not to share it with me,
And the love which my spirit hath painted
It never hath found but in thee.5

He believed there was "not a more angelic being upon earth" than Augusta, and such was his regard for her that he made out his will to her and her children, instead of Lady Byron, his wife.6

The apparent result of their affection was incest and a child, Medora Leigh. Though some doubt that Byron and Augusta actually committed incest, Byron published in 1813 during the time of the incest a poem, "The Bride of Abydos," which touched upon an act of incest and the ensuing guilt. His writings concerning the poem would tend to support the belief that incest had, indeed, been committed. In his journal on December 6, 1813, he stated that he began the poem "with my heart full of xxx, and my head of orientations... and wrote on rapidly."7 He had also written to E.D. Clarke, Professor of Mineralogy at Cambridge, that he felt compelled "to make my hero and heroine relatives, as you well know that none else could there obtain that degree of intercourse leading to genuine affection."8

In "Manfred," published three years after "The Bride of Abydos," Byron again returned to the subject of incest, though not specifically stated as such. Manfred's crime, though never stated in the poem, is hinted at when Manfred says that he and Astarte were young and "loved each other as we should not love. ..."9 Later in the poem, Manfred asks Astarte to forgive him, even though "it were the deadliest sin to love as we have loved. ..."10 These lines indicate that Manfred's crime was the same as that of Byron's--incest--and that the guilt that haunted Manfred is a reflection of Byron's continuing remorse over that episode in his own life.

Thus it can be said that though never portrayed directly in any of Byron's poetry, Augusta Leigh and her involvement with Byron had a great effect on his poetry.

In 1815, shortly after the incestuous relationship with Augusta, Byron married Anna Isabella Milbanke. With her, his ambivalence toward women is seen in full force. Liking women who talked because then they thought less, Byron found Annabella the "most silent woman I ever encountered."11 He came to hate the qualities in her he had admired--her cleverness, propriety, respectability, chastity, and virtuosity. Their disparities, with Byron raging at Annabella almost uncontrollably, became increasingly difficult to overcome, and they were separated in 1816.

In writing the first cantos of the satirical "Don Juan" in 1819, Byron again used his experiences as a basis for his work. He stated, in fact, that "almost all 'Don Juan' is real life either my own or from people I knew."12 The women of "Don Juan", with the possible exceptions of Haidee and Aurora Raby, are seen in all of their pretensions, guise, and vagaries of character. Elizabeth Boyd believes "Don Juan" to contain Byron's "explanation of the havoc wrought in his life by love affairs and
the ruin of his reputation."13

Of all the women characters in "Don Juan" though, not one
can have her origin traced to an actual woman with the celerity
that Donna Inez can be traced to Lady Byron. Though he denied
that the character of Donna Inez was ever a satire of his wife,
Byron’s allusions to Lady Byron’s character and the events of
their marriage are unmistakable. Byron had stated in his
journal that Lady Byron was an only child, a savante, a
mathematician, a metaphysician, and a generous person.14

These same attributes can be seen in Donna Inez in the first
canto of “Don Juan” when she is described as an only child in
stanza 37, a savante in stanza 10, a mathematician in stanza 12,
a metaphysician in stanza 13, and generous in stanza 12. Lady
Byron’s ability to remain calm and stoical during Byron’s
frequent rages at her occasioned high regard for her by their
acquaintances, and this facet of her character is also a trait of
Donna Inez. “Calmly she heard each calumny that rose/And
saw his agonies with such sublimity/That all the world
exclaimed, ‘What magnanimity.’ ”15

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that Donna Inez is in
part Lady Byron is the episode in “Don Juan” in which Donna
Inez attempts to prove her husband, Don Jose, mad:

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;
Yet when they asked her for her depositions,
No sort of explanations could be had,
Save that her duty both to man and God
Required this conduct—which seemed very sad.16

This is, in fact, the exact scene that occurred between Byron
and his wife. He recounted to Thomas Medwin that he was
“surprised one day by a Doctor and a Lawyer almost forcing
themselves...into my room. I did not know...that they were
sent to provide proofs of my insanity.”17 When Byron was
proved sane, Lady Byron stated that she had felt compelled by
God to do as she had done.18

In later cantos of “Don Juan”, Byron broadened his
characters so that they could not be said to refer specifically to
any one person whom he had known, but rather were
conglomerates of various persons of Byron’s acquaintance.
Lady Adeline, introduced in the thirteenth canto, had
characteristics typical of the high born, well brought up ladies
of English society in Byron’s time, but one characteristic of hers
was undoubtedly that of Lady Byron also—great self-respect
and confidence in her virtue and wisdom. When Adeline sees
Juan falling under the spell of Lady Fitz-Fulke, she “begins to
ponder how to save his soul,”19 and according to Byron this
overwhelming determination to succeed in saving a soul will
eventually ruin both Juan and herself. Byron, in a letter to
Thomas Medwin, had stated that Lady Byron had married him
with the intentions of “reforming and fixing me.”20 Yet her
self-control, determination, and virtuosity, rather than
persuading Byron to change by her example, merely increased
his resentment of her by the very air of superiority it gave her.

It cannot be stated, therefore, that Augusta and Annabella
were without influence on Byron’s poetry. Without them, his
poetry would still reflect the influence of other women in his
life, but the impact of Augusta’s and Annabella’s relationship
with Byron was singular.