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Romanticism, a Romance: Jane Austen and Lord Byron, 1813-1815

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On her part there are only the two references, usually read as dismissive. One is the bit in *Persuasion* where Anne Elliot and the short, shy, melancholy, and rather silly Captain Benwick go "through a brief comparison of opinion as to the first-rate poets, trying to ascertain whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*; and moreover, how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced." When the lovelorn captain repeats "with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and look[s] so entirely as if he meant to be understood," and Anne ventures "to hope he did not always read only poetry," and recommends "a larger allowance of prose in his daily study," the reader suspects Lord Byron is being laughed at (*P*, 100). Austen's giggle is more unmistakable in the second of two letters she wrote to her sister on March 5, 1814, just one month after Byron's *The Corsair* had sold a remarkable ten thousand copies—and led his publisher to offer him an astonishing ten thousand guineas. (Her own *Sense and Sensibility* had sold out the year before, bringing her one hundred forty pounds.) The letter to Cassandra begins, "Do not be angry with me for beginning another Letter to you. I have read The Corsair, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do" (*Letters*, 379).

Lord Byron made no reference at all to Jane Austen: "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."[1] His bride-to-be Annabella Milbanke, of whom he wrote, "Her proceedings are quite rectangular, or rather we are two parallel lines prolonged to infinity side by side but never to meet" (*B'sL&J*, II, 231), read *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, the year it came out. She judged it "a very superior work," "the *most probable* fiction I have ever read," and was eager to know more about the writer—"to know who is the author or *-ess* as I am told."[2] But she seemed not to have discussed the author or the book with her suitor. Byron once boasted that he had read over 4,000 novels, and in a letter to Murray requesting a copy of *The Wanderer* to help Lord Holland through his gout, he wrote, "I would almost fall sick myself to get at Me. D'Arblay's writings" (*B'sL&J*, 204). But elsewhere he claims that "when I do read, I can only bear the chicken broth of—*any thing* but Novels" (*B'sL&J*, 234). Consistency was not one of his virtues. On the whole it seems likely that stories about three or four families in a country village in England were of little interest to the author of verse romances about solitary, sullen wanderers in exotic, distant lands. It seems equally plausible that Jane Austen, who sewed up her plots so neatly and never wrote a scene without a woman in it, could care much about a poem in

pieces like *The Giaour*, the action of which begins when its silent heroine is sewn in a sack to be drowned.

For all that, Austen and Byron, close contemporaries, beg to be talked about together, and frequently have been. They seem to embody and invite and thus reinforce familiar binary oppositions: male and female, free and constrained, celebrated and obscure, self-indulgent aristocrat and saving, respectable homebody; Romantic poet and domestic novelist, careless producer of endless versions and careful rewriter, oversexed and asexual, sinner and saint; a handsome creature we have many gorgeous portraits of and a sharp little face in a sketch. Byron and Austen, more than most dead writers, have had remarkable posthumous careers as household words. Hers became a name to conjure with only some fifty years after her death, while he famously starred, in his own lifetime, in the pageant of his bleeding heart, but in English-speaking countries at least they are about equally famous now in what remains of the common language. Saturnine, rebellious, open-shirted, moody young men are still recognized as Byronic, and an astonishing range of women writers—from Brookner to Pym to Weldon and even to Lessing—are routinely compared to Jane Austen. If you protest that the parallel is not exact, his *life* being the thing he's remembered for, and her *work*, I will reply that what we mean when we say Jane Austen is an impression of *her* that we catch from her work—what Lionel Trilling called "the legend of Jane Austen."[3]

Austen and Byron are literary figures in more than one sense of the word: they are images of kinds of writers and images for abstractions that continue to matter to us, for the sexual specificity of man and woman—Romantic man and woman, man and woman imagined as matching opposites. As, for example, Wordsworth and Frances Burney are not. Were we in for a Regency revival, images of Austen and Byron might intelligibly replace the poster-sized photos of Virginia Woolf and Henry James on the twin lavatories of a fashionable literary agent in New York. The fact that as everyone knows she was a spinster, and that he was notoriously (by now) bisexual, only intensifies their force as figures for gender, she of the conventionally repressed feminine, he of the vigorous masculine—the veiled novelist who wrote under the generic name, "A Lady" and the Noble Poet who was so crucially a real lord.

Byron and Austen are taken to represent class as well as gender—the upper classes, of which they occupied very different strata. Fair enough, as both were always mindful of class and equally beset by the class system, he feeling obliged to spend like a lord, she to scrimp so as to live like a lady. But both also mocked the system that sets one individual over another by reason of birth, and encourages posturing and comical scrambles for status. What Byron and Austen have in common—what I mean to explore in order to question the habit of framing them as opposites—is a sense of humor about the obligation men and women have to be gentlemen and ladies, and even men and women. They comment in similar tones on the smallness of human individuals in the greatness of time and space. "It is a truth universally

acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." And he:

> When a man has no freedom to fight for at home
> Let him combate for that of his neighbours;
> Let him think of the glory of Greece and Rome
> And get knocked on the head for his labours.

These are the voices of civilized people, of a lady and a gentleman—but a lady and a gentleman with doubts about civilization and its demands and definitions of ladies and gentlemen, even women and men. They are pleasurable, bracing voices that make us smile in complicity; their salient characteristic is irony.

Irony, writes David Lodge, is unique among rhetorical devices, being "not distinguished from literal statement by any peculiarity of verbal form. An ironic statement," Lodge goes on, "is recognized as such in the act of interpretation."[4] I would add that irony also signals anticipation of this interpretive act—looks, like Captain Benwick, as if it means to be understood—and thus implies and urges a mutual understanding between writer and reader based on shared suspiciousness of verbal and other inadequate, because inflexible, forms and constructs.

Byron and Austen both had a real respect for form in literature: for the form of romance, which plots the perfection or realization of the self, and for the tight forms of the Tory satirists of an earlier age (she admired Johnson, he Pope). Austen, the more perfect artist, managed to put romance and irony in equipoise, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the same year that thirteen-years-younger Byron, profligate of words as of everything, clumsily undercut his High Romantic *Giaour* by appending tongue-in-cheek notes; he didn't manage to marry romance and irony until he wrote *Don Juan*, much later. It is the coexistence of irony and romance in Byron's and Austen's writing, along with certain coincidences of dates, that is the ground for the following narrative about two parallel years in their lives. Its theme is the romantic-ironic apprehension of character, character seen as a social and literary construct. Not quite a romance, my story is nevertheless haunted by the Romantic marriage plot—and its haunting opposite, the Romantic theme of brother-sister incest.

2.

If not for her brother Henry, Jane Austen would not have come close to Byron, as she did in 1813-1815. The sickness and death of Henry's wife Eliza, rather too quickly followed by his search for a new bride, summoned his sister from the country to London. We know something of Henry's character from the fact that he married Eliza, the daughter of George Austen's sister Mrs. Hancock, who was already Eliza de Feuillide when the Austen children came to know her at Steventon in the late 1780s—quite the most exotic member of the family, the well-travelled, lively, very social wife of a Frenchman, who would be guillotined during the Terror. (Critics see her as the model for over-sophisticated Mary Crawford.) Eliza, who was ten years older than he, had quite literally watched Henry Austen grow up,

marvelling, in her letters, at the increasing height of this tallest of the Austen boys. She married him on the last day of the year 1797, when he was 26.

Henry was four years older than his novelist sister (Cassandra and Francis were born between them). When he married the thirty-six-year-old widow, he was an officer in the militia; later he became a banker, and later still, after Eliza's death, he was ordained. He was the most urban and urbane of the Austen boys, charming and cool—even cold. From the gleeful letter Jane Austen wrote to Cassandra about how much he admired Henry Crawford when she began to read *Mansfield Park* to him we must conclude that the character was not only based on but also aimed at him. To their sailor brother Francis, two months after Eliza's death, she wrote, "Upon the whole his Spirits are very much recovered.—If I may so express myself, his Mind is not a Mind for affliction. He is too Busy, too active, too sanguine" (*Letters*, 315).

Her London-based brother had become Jane Austen's literary agent and self-appointed promoter when she first began to prepare her novels to be published; he annoyed and amused and gratified her by telling everyone he could that "A Lady" was his sister. After Eliza's death, he liked to have his sister Jane in London with him. There are many such pleasant brother-sister couples in Austen's novels: think of Henry Tilney and his sister. Ruth Perry reminds us that the brother-sister bond was more solemn and tender in Austen's time than now, and suggests that there were good reasons in this period for an increase in the poignancy of the relation between young adult siblings of different sexes who had been something more like equals in childhood.[5] The intermittent intimacy between Jane Austen and her newly single brother took place between April 1813 and the end of 1815, which are more or less the years of our story. They are also the years of the completion of *Mansfield Park* and the writing and publication of *Emma*; of Napoleon's abdication and exile and escape; of Henry and Jane Austen's niece Anna Austen's engagement and marriage to Ben Lefroy (a cousin of the Tom Lefroy with whom the young Jane had flirted); and of Lord Byron's courtship of the virtuous, novel-reading Annabella Milbanke, and his simultaneous affair with (among others) Augusta Leigh, his father's daughter, a married woman five years older than he whom he had *not* known as a child.

The Austen and Byron worlds were separate, very different spheres; Jane Austen and Lord Byron had very different experiences and characters; and by pointing to the parallel pairings of Jane and Henry and George and Augusta I do not mean to cook up a scandal. I do mean, however, to suggest that the central Romantic theme of the self's ideal other, which played itself out, in Byron's works and life, in anti-marriage plots of various kinds, including, in *Manfred*, the unspeakable plot of brother-sister incest, had its pale reflection in Austen's life, and also in her novels. Like Byron, Austen was skeptical about pictures of perfection, and about perfect romance; cozy brother-sister couples are among the elements that undercut her reiterated marriage plot. Intimations of family-wrecking brother-sister pairings occur in all the six novels, most urgently in *Mansfield Park*, but I will confine myself to one thrilling passage:

> "Whom are you going to dance with?" asked Mr. Knightley.
>
> She hesitated a moment, and then replied, "With you, if you will ask me."
>
> "Will you?" said he, offering his hand.
>
> "Indeed I will. You have shown that you can dance, and you know we are not really so much brother and sister as to make it at all improper."
>
> "Brother and sister! no, indeed." (*E*, 331)

A footnote, here, for those inclined to shake their heads sadly over the great discrepancy between Byron's physical pleasures and Jane Austen's: while she delighted in dancing well into her thirties, he, of course, couldn't, didn't, dance at all. You will remember that one of her caustic Henrys, Henry Tilney, compares marriage to a country dance.

In January of 1813 Lord Byron turned twenty-five and Jane Austen was just thirty-seven; while both were unmarried, he had had extensive and exotic sexual experience, in England and the East, while she had spent some years entertaining marriage proposals, and more years observing marriages, in Hampshire. Their lives were different from the start: he had grown up "an only son left with an only mother" (*DJ*, I, 37), poor to begin with, then suddenly elevated to the peerage at ten years old, and alienated from his mother; she had a large family, always shared a room with her older sister Cassandra, and was closely connected to her brothers' families, especially the girls. She had been to school only very briefly, and would boast that she was "the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress"; he had gone to Harrow and Cambridge. She was used to her brothers and their friends, and he was one of those young men who delight in older women, especially witty ones; it is hard to imagine them finding common ground in a social encounter, given her severity in judging people, the distance between them made by social class, and the notoriety of the one writer and anonymity of the other. Would she have thought him at all *serious*, or sane? could he have taken her seriously? might they have managed to laugh together at the things both laughed at separately? To exchange thoughts or even glances about the incommensurability of experience and desire? Argue about heroes and heroines, and the attractions of the foreign and the domestic? Probably not. But if one looks at them from here, seeing how close Austen and Byron came to each other in those years, it is hard to avoid seeing certain near intersections. Because Austen and Byron were creatures of the same cultural climate—of the Regency, and the decisive turn to Romanticism—and perhaps because the characteristic irony of each was an expression of temperamental kinship, some of their reactions to the world of 1813-1815 are surprisingly similar.

In Chawton in the first month of the year 1813 Jane Austen was as usual reading widely—"Captain Pasley's Essay on the Military police of the British Empire," among other things, which also included a collection of parodies, "Rejected Addresses" purportedly written for the reopening of the Drury Lane Theatre, the first of which was supposedly by the celebrated Lord Byron. He also began the year 1813 out of London, rather differently situated, hiding out from pursuing hostesses, mothers, daughters, and adul-

terous wives—Lady Caroline Lamb was prominent among the latter—in the country house of his friends the Oxfords. Forty-year-old Lady Oxford was a friend of the Princess of Wales, whose husband the Regent, eager for a divorce, was spreading tales about her. From Chawton, Jane Austen declared herself to be on the princess's side against the prince, "because she *is* a woman, and because I hate her Husband" (*Letters*, 504); nevertheless she particularly disapproved of the Regent's wife's friendship with the notoriously promiscuous Lady Oxford, the mother of a group of differently-fathered children wits liked to call "The Harleian miscellany." Byron, who adored his hostess's eleven-year-old daughter, Charlotte Harley, was Lady Oxford's current lover. The unsavory Waleses—and behind them, the feeble-minded old king, George III—set the tone for an important theme of Byron's and Austen's writing: the values of fidelity and domesticity, of loyalty to family and nation.

Just before his twenty-fifth birthday, Byron quit the Oxford menage, which included a complaisant husband and a little brother of Charlotte's whom it pleased to cut the poet with a rock, close to the eye. On the 19th of January he returned to London—from whence Jane Austen received her "own darling child," *Pride and Prejudice*, on the twenty-seventh. It was at the end of April that she was summoned to the metropolis by Henry to care for the dying Eliza. When she came back again in May, barely a month after Eliza was buried, she and Henry went to see an exhibition of paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds. The proud parental novelist wrote to Cassandra that she looked around there for likenesses of her heroines, Mrs. Bingley and Mrs. Darcy. Reality, or Reynolds, couldn't measure up to her favorite Elizabeth, she reported; or perhaps, she speculated playfully, Mr. Darcy "prizes any Picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye.—I can imagine he wd have that sort of feeling—that mixture of Love, Pride & Delicacy" (*Letters*, 312). Byron, who went to the same exhibition on the same day or nearly, also went looking for a portrait of a certain lady. In his case it was someone he actually knew, Lady Melbourne, the sixtyish mother-in-law of Lady Caroline Lamb, the mistress who refused to allow him to cast her off. She was also the aunt of Annabella Milbanke. Byron loved to confide in Lady Melbourne by letter, chronicling Caroline's escapades, nearly confessing to his affair with his sister, and vowing he wanted to marry Annabella so as to gain his correspondent as an aunt. Flirting shamelessly, he wrote to Lady Melbourne that he positively feared to see how beautiful she had been at seventeen, when Reynolds had painted her: "I *must* see you at Sir *Joshua's*—though I don't much like venturing on the sight of *seventeen*—it is bad enough *now*—& must have been *worse then*—the painter was not so much to blame as you seem to imagine by adding a few years—he foresaw you would lose nothing by them" (*B'sL&J*, III, 46). Byron's gallantry, like Austen's fantasy, is focused on the erotics of portrait-painting, and the problems of fixing and framing character.

In January, Lady Caroline Lamb had stolen a portrait of Byron that hung in John Murray's office; he was soon arranging to pose again, this time in an elaborate Albanian costume he described in solemn detail in a letter to a

female fan. As Jane Austen knew, a portrait was a sign of a person's importance: writing to Cassandra apropos of admirers of her work, she joked, "I do not despair of having my picture in the Exhibition at last—all white & red, with my Head on one Side . . ." (*Letters*, 368). Her fantasies of being a literary lion were always inflected by irony: "If I *am* a wild Beast, I cannot help it. It is not my own fault" (*Letters*, 311), she wrote when a friend of Henry's begged to be introduced to her. Byron's sense of irony about the public's perception of him was slighter, but it did exist: as he kept adding to the *Giaour*, and encouraging and denying rumors that his criminal, sensitive hero was and was not himself, he observed that Lady Melbourne would "perhaps perceive in parts a coincidence in my own state of mind with that of my hero—if so you will give me credit for feeling—though on the other hand I lose in your esteem" (*B'sL&J*, 124).

In June 1813, the *Giaour* was published, and Jane Austen finished *Mansfield Park*. She did not come to Henry in London until September, when he and she and three of their nieces, two little girls plus the marriageable Fanny Knight, went to the Lyceum Theatre and then to Covent Garden. At the first they saw a pantomime version of *Don Juan*: "We all have seen him, in the pantomime," Byron would write later about the main character in this legend, "Sent to the Devil somewhat ere his time" (*DJ*, I, 1). Austen wrote in a surprisingly similar irreverant tone that her young nieces had "revelled in 'Don Juan,' whom we left in hell at half-past eleven." She went on more soberly, "I must say that I have seen nobody on the stage who has been a more interesting character than that compound of cruelty and lust"—a surprisingly Byronic view of what interesting characteristics were (*Letters*, 321, 323). But the acting, she noted, was disappointing. She would be more impressed by Kean, whom she saw for the first time in March 1814, as Shylock. "We were quite satisfied with Kean. I cannot imagine better acting," she wrote in the letter to Cassandra that records her reading of *The Corsair*. And again, with somewhat less modified rapture, "I shall like to see Kean again excessively, & to see him with you too;—it appeared to me as if there were no fault in him anywhere; and in his scene with Tubal there was exquisite acting" (*Letters*, 380, 381).

If her language suggests she was less than overwhelmed by the originality of Kean's Shylock, finding only "exquisite acting" in what Hazlitt described as a radical reinterpretation, she was certainly impressed and moved by the actor's representation of character. Byron was also impelled by enthusiasm for Kean to leave off his customary irony—if not, altogether, his self-consciousness. He wrote of Kean with enormous excitement: "There is a new Actor named Kean come out—he is a wonder—& we are yet wise enough to admire him—he is superior to Cooke certainly in many points—& will run Kemble hard—his style is quite new—or rather *renewed*—being that of Nature" (*B'sL&J*, IV, 67). And elsewhere, "By Jove, he is a soul!" (*B'sL&J*, III, 244). And to Annabella Milbanke, "he is the triumph of mind over matter for he has nothing but countenance & expression—his figure is very little & even mean—but I never saw the Passions so expressed—on the stage at least—" (*B'sL&J*, IV, 216). He was thrilled to dine with

Kean, and to give him a present. And he wrote defensively to the virtuous Annabella, whose family knew the very respectable Mrs. Siddons, "I am acquainted with no *im*material sensuality so delightful as good acting" (*B'sL&J*, IV, 115). The practical, aesthetic, and moral dimensions of acting were interesting to Byron, who would write unplayable dramas, and to the author of *Mansfield Park*. More important than the predictable differences in what they said about Kean, I think, is the fact that both writers were engaged by his art of presenting himself and not himself, of representing character.

Mansfield Park was probably accepted for publication in November 1813, when Austen was in London for two weeks. Had she not declined an invitation to meet Mme de Stael (it was tendered her, through Henry, by a nobleman), she might have met Lord Byron at the party. His amorous and financial affairs had put him in a particularly gloomy state of mind, and in a journal he was keeping that winter he wrote, "I have some idea of expectorating a romance, or rather a tale in prose;—but what romance could equal the events—" (*B'sL&J*, IV, 205). The events, presumably, were those surrounding his sexual relationship with Augusta. His contemptuous verb, the blustering boast, the petulantly girlish conclusion to the event ("I have burnt my *Roman*," he wrote a few pages later), his very journal-keeping invite one to think he was under the influence of the lady novelists of his time. In a later journal entry, about *The Bride of Abydos*, he suggests he was concerned with their abiding literary problem: "I also wished to try my hand on a female character in Zuleika—& have endeavoured as far as ye grossness of our masculine ideas will allow—to preserve her purity without impairing the ardour of her attachment" (*B'sL&J*, III, 199). With the heroine of the *Bride*, Byron embarked on the process of creating active female characters that Caroline Franklin has argued was crucial to his development.[6] Surely he read the novelist in his effort to portray female subjectivity and female desire—to let a heroine out of her sack, as it were.

In the frigid weeks of early March 1814, when Austen and Byron both saw Kean play Shylock, they both also witnessed—from very different angles—another, somewhat more private drama. He characteristically, was actively engaged in it; she, who doubtless read about it in the papers, surprises us by mentioning it at all. "What cruel weather this is! and here is Lord Portsmouth married too to Miss Hanson," Jane Austen wrote her sister from London (*Letters*, 386). Miss Hanson was the daughter of Byron's solicitor, and the wedding was of note partly because the Noble Poet cut a figure at the altar, where he gave the bride away (he "rammed their left hands, by mistake, into one another," he ruefully noted in his journal) (*B'sL&J*, III, 248). Byron was later called upon to testify to Lord Portsmouth's sanity, his younger brother having been provoked, by the marriage to a young bride, to prove him incompetent. In light of Byron's own hung-over condition that cold morning, one is skeptical of his insistence on the elderly lord's comparative alertness. Austen's sense of the cruelty of the occasion seems to have been altogether appropriate: none of the principals seems to have been altogether savory, neither the eager bride nor the stuttering old lord nor the grasping younger brother and surely not Byron, who, they said, was there because—for

reasons of his own—he had once promised to ennoble Mary Anne Hanson. Mary Anne's "great" but evidently cynical marriage occurred as Byron was frantically and ambivalently seeking to save his soul and his fortune by marrying Annabella Milbanke. His efforts in that direction were perhaps intensified by the Portsmouth wedding, and certainly by an event that occurred a month after it: the birth of Medora Leigh, his half-sister's daughter and probably also his.

The sound of wedding bells however sour promises an ending to my romance, therefore a marriage for my hero and heroine. Two are at hand: Byron's in January 1815, and, on the heroine's side, Anna Austen's the preceding November. One is free, of course, to choose a more modern and more feminist conclusion, and end in the last month of 1815, when Byron's publisher Murray brings out *Emma*, formally dedicated to the Prince Regent, and Byron's legitimate daughter Ada is born a week before Jane Austen's birthday. Preferring the conventional marital ending for tradition's and irony's sake, I will stick with Byron's marriage to Lady Melbourne's niece because it was decisive and disastrous, and Jane Austen's niece's marriage because it was *not* Jane Austen's. Wonderfully, in this instance, history provides.

One is moved to borrow a quotation from Byron, of all people, to describe Jane Austen's relation to the marriage plot in 1814. In the middle of his complex schemes and dissipations, a month before Mary Anne Hanson's wedding, Byron had meditated in his journal with premature maturity: "To write so as to bring home to the heart, the heart must have been tried,—but, perhaps, ceased to be so. While you are under the influence of passions, you only feel, but cannot describe them,—any more than, when in action, you could turn round and tell the story to your next neighbour! When all is over,—all, all, and irrevocable,—trust to memory—she is then but too faithful" (*B'sL&J*, III, 245). Watching from the sidelines as her brother shopped for a wife, and her nieces Fanny and Anna fell more and less ridiculously in love, Jane Austen would perhaps have agreed that she could so confidently bring out her novels about marrying because, for her, all was over. She was even beginning to sit out dances: "I find many Douceurs," she wrote with plaintive archness, "in being a sort of Chaperon" (*Letters*, 370). As an aunt she had her worries: about, for instance, the marriageability of Anna's Ben, who was moody and, she wrote, "mad"—what people were saying about Lord Byron, who was exactly Ben's age. In the event, Ben worked out well—at least, Anna's aunt was sanguine enough to write her soon after the wedding, in the course of giving advice about the plotting of a novel Anna was writing, "I rather imagine that Neices are seldom chosen but in compliment to some Aunt or other. I daresay Ben was in love with me once, & wd never have thought of *you* if he had not supposed me dead of a scarlet fever" (*Letters*, 421). There are audible echoes of Byron's gallant and perverse compliments to Lady Melbourne—which of course Jane Austen could never have heard.

Anna Austen got married on November 8, 1814; Byron married Annabella on January 2, 1815. She had accepted him, by letter, in September,

ending his self-fracturing scramble in several directions at once—toward reaffirming the blood of the Byrons either by marriage to a rich and rectangular virtuous virgin or by sinfully, secretly loving his soft other self, his father's daughter Augusta; or, on the other hand, toward leaving England and all the Byrons behind him, selling his family estate, and escaping to the continent and the east, braving plagues and wars abroad to roam alone, like a hero of one of his poems, which everyone was already saying he was. But heroism seemed doomed, partly because of the world-historical events that occurred in the Spring of 1814. A few days before Medora Leigh's birth, Napoleon Bonaparte had abdicated, moving Byron to meditate in verse, with characteristic philosophical romantic irony, on the fall of tyrants. Uncharacteristically, he published his "Ode on Napoleon" anonymously; and Jane Austen, uncharacteristically, copied out some of the lines that Napoleon's fall had inspired Lord Byron to write.

Her own philosophical romantic irony was directed at nearer objects, odd pairs and groups more often than individuals, and interactions rather than actions. "What strange creatures we are!" she wrote to her niece Fanny, apropos of one of that young woman's several complicated courtships, at about the time Anna Austen married Ben Lefroy. "It seems as if your being secure of him (as you say yourself) had made you indifferent" (*Letters*, 408). Jane Austen relished the patterns made by intersecting lives and contiguous minds. I have put her life in 1813-1815 next to Byron's in what I take to be her ironic spirit, to point to some strangenesses the conjunction points up.

NOTES

All bracketed references are to *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1954; *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, Second Edition, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1979; and *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, Harvard University Press, 1974.

[1] Doucet Devin Fischer, "Byron and Austen: Romance and Reality," *The Byron Journal*, 21, 1993, pp. 71-79; quotation from p. 71.

[2] Quoted in *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, by William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, revised and enlarged by Deirdre Le Faye, The British Library, 1989, p. 175.

[3] See Lionel Trilling, "*Emma* and the Legend of Jane Austen."

[4] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, Viking, 1993, p. 179.

[5] Ruth Perry, "The Disinheritance of Daughters," paper delivered at Eighteenth-Century Seminar, Barnard College, 20 October 1994.

[6] See Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines*, Oxford University Press, 1993.