

## Jane Austen and Lord Byron: Connections

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Jane Austen and Lord Byron never met, of course, but in the years 1813-14-15, such a meeting was within the realm of at least remote possibility.

Byron's *Childe Harold* was published in June 1812. He was twenty-four, and immediately he became the most sensational and sought-after figure in London literary and social circles. For the next few years, the "glorious boy" was at the height of his fame.

During those years, Jane Austen was much in London, staying with her brother Henry, overseeing the publication of her own books—and reading Byron, as was almost everyone else in England. "I have read the *Corsair*, mended my petticoat, and have nothing else to do," she wrote to Cassandra on March 5, 1814. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot and the unhappy Captain Benwick discuss the poetry of Scott and Byron, and she exhorts him to read less romantic poetry of the likes of *The Bride of Abydos* and *The Giaour* and concentrate on solid, improving prose.

Jane Austen was familiar with Byron's work, but I have found no evidence that he ever read any of her novels, or even heard of her, though her books were read and talked of by members of his social set. Lady Bessborough (the mother of Lady Caroline Lamb, Byron's most notorious mistress) wrote of *Sense and Sensibility* "though it ends stupidly, I was much amused by it." Another lady was much amused by *Pride and Prejudice*, published in January 1813. "A very superior work," wrote Annabella Milbanke, the future Lady Byron, to her mother, "I really think it is the *most probable* fiction I have ever read." The marriage of Lord Byron and Annabella took place in January 1815, and lasted a year. Byron was no Mr. Darcy and Annabella no Elizabeth Bennett. During that short tempestuous union, one doubts that *Pride and Prejudice* was ever their bedside reading.

In 1815, John Murray became Jane Austen's publisher. He had been Byron's since 1812. It would be pleasant to think of the two authors meeting at the door of 50 Albemarle Street, but no such meeting occurred. It is certain that Jane Austen would not have been invited to the famous literary gatherings in John Murray's back parlour—they were strictly male. But it was there that Byron met and became friendly with Sir Walter Scott, who we know admired Jane Austen's work. As the two poets stood chatting by the fire, did Scott ever mention her to Byron as a writer to be noted?

Jane Austen was somewhat lower in the social scale than Byron, and it's not likely she would have been invited to any of the grand parties at Lord Holland's or Lady Melbourne's during those delightful summers of 1813-14. But she was asked to join the more democratic literary circle at Madame de Stael's, and might well have encountered Byron there, had she accepted the invitation.

She might not, however, have been very impressed. Byron did not shine on these occasions. He was a brilliant conversationalist, but at Madame de Stael's, he was silent. She bored him. He thought she talked too much—"she buries one... in an avalanche of glittering nonsense." Madame de Stael, on her part, accused him of being affected and falling asleep at her dinner table or, at the very least, half-closing his eyes. "What this last can mean, I don't know, unless *she* is opposite," he wrote to Lady Melbourne. Perhaps Jane Austen was wiser than she knew in refusing Madame de Stael's invitation. If she had accepted, would Byron have been able to stay awake? Jane Austen had a reputation for silence, but he might have preferred that to Madame de Stael talking "folios." Had either been able to speak, would he have considered her an intellectual equal, or would he have dismissed her as a countrified frump?

And what would Jane Austen have thought of him? She might have been surprised, as many people were, to meet *not* Childe Harold, cloaked in melancholy, but a cheerful, ironic young man with a sense of humour as keen as her own—one who "dearly loved a laugh," as did she. She would probably have been amused by his "buffooneries" and puns, but certainly she would not have condoned his lurid affairs with women, his youthful extravagance, or his unfortunate propensity for going into debt. She would no doubt have thought it excessive of him to order twenty-four white waistcoats at once—surely six would have been enough.

They were at one in their dislike of the Prince Regent, though both authors were flattered by his admiration of their work. Both had a high regard for Newfoundland dogs. Byron owned several during his life, from the famous Boatswain, companion of his youth, to Lyon, who accompanied him on the last, fateful journey to Greece. In an early tale of Jane Austen's, a young sailor is posted to Newfoundland "from whence he regularly sent home a large Newfoundland Dog every month to his family." Later, in *Northanger Abbey*, she gave Henry Tilney "a large Newfoundland puppy and two or three terriers" to relieve his solitude at Woodston Parsonage.

We have pretty good evidence of what Jane Austen thought of Byron's work at this period. She seems to have considered it entertaining, if somewhat over-heated and inflammatory. The romantic extravagance so characteristic of his poetry at this time was not for her.

What he would have thought of her novels we can never know. I think he would have admired the elegance and suppleness of her prose. He was an excellent critic and recognized good writing when he saw it. He would probably have found her domestic themes uncomfortably close to the social life of Southwell in Nottinghamshire where, as a boy, he had lived with his mother. It was an atmosphere he found stifling, and from which he escaped as soon as he could. Jane Austen, although she enjoyed her visits to London, was content with her limited life at Chawton. She found it congenial, and constantly drew inspiration from it.

Jane Austen died on July 18, 1817. She died, as she had lived, quietly and unobtrusively. She was buried in Winchester Cathedral

and the epitaph, placed on her grave by her sorrowful family, makes no mention of her novels or her literary fame.

Byron, on the other hand, created as great a stir in death as he did in life. He died on April 19, 1824, in the miserable swamps of Missolonghi. When the news reached England on May 14th, it "came upon London like an earthquake" wrote Allan Cunningham in the *London Magazine*. Mourning was universal. But the ostracism which had driven him from England eight years earlier still clung to him in death. When his body arrived in London in July, it was refused burial in Westminster Abbey. The loyal John Hobhouse, determined that his friend should be honoured, arranged for the coffin to lie in state at 20 Great George Street, Westminster, before it was taken north to be interred in the family tomb at Hucknall Torkard, near Byron's beloved home, Newstead Abbey.

A final connection—20 Great George Street was the London house of Sir Edward Knatchbull, who in 1820 had married Fanny Knight, Jane Austen's favourite niece.

#### SOURCES

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