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## She Walked in Beauty

Annabella's conviction that she could save the troubled poet won out over her natural caution.



A portrait of Annabella Milbanke, ca. 1800. PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

By **CHARLOTTE GORDON**

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**Julia Markus's** deliciously absorbing biography, “Lady Byron and Her Daughters,” starts, as any good Regency romance should, with a lovely young woman, Annabella Milbanke, meeting a dangerous young rake—Lord Byron. But here’s the catch: They don’t fall in love. At least not at first. It takes another year before Annabella falls, and Byron, well, he never does. A wedding soon follows, but then, as Ms. Markus puts it, “Reader, prepare for a train wreck.”

Ms. Markus paints Annabella’s privileged background in vivid strokes—doting parents, the best tutors, wealth, beauty. By age 19, she was strong-minded, self-confident, supremely virtuous and sought after by countless suitors. Byron, on the other hand, was imploding. Debt-ridden, angst-ridden, he slept with anyone and everyone but

essentially yearned for love with men. In 1812, when Annabella first encountered him, he had just become “Byron,” the comet who flared onto the social horizon and set everyone and everything on fire. Lady Caroline Lamb, the wife of Annabella’s cousin, was so consumed with passion for him that she ended up in an asylum. His sneers, his dark and brooding brow, his limp—he had been born with a club foot—everything about him was fascinating. Men imitated him. Women seduced him, or tried to, but the highly rational Annabella steered clear of the commotion, writing her mother, “He is not a dangerous person to me.”

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LADY BYRON AND HER DAUGHTERS

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By Julia Markus

*Norton, 364 pages, \$28.95*

But before long, she too had succumbed, as her conviction that she could save the troubled poet won out over her natural caution. “In a sudden rush,” Ms. Markus writes, “Annabella made a secret vow to herself: She would silently, in her heart of hearts, be Lord Byron’s devoted friend.” To her

mother she confided, “He is a very bad, very good man.” It was her Christian duty, she believed, to help soothe his suffering and steer him on the path of virtue. He, by contrast, saw marriage to Annabella as an opportunity to help him conceal one of his very dirty secrets. What was this secret? He was in love with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, and had a child by her named Medora.

With admirable calm, Ms. Markus traces Byron’s cold-blooded courtship of Annabella. A veteran biographer, she allows us to have compassion for Byron: “It is just as psychologically damaging to be committed to someone you cannot love as it is to be romantically in love with someone who does not love you,” she observes. But she never loses sight of the harm he inflicts on an innocent young woman. Byron knew that if his incestuous relationship were made public, his sister and her children would be ruined. Already there were whispers. The situation was urgent, and so he pressed his suit. Against her parents’ advice, Annabella married Byron in 1815, and the whispers were silenced—temporarily. But Byron could not bear his marriage. Racked by his own desires and enraged at Annabella’s implacable good-heartedness, he tortured her, flaunting his relationship with his sister and bringing other women to their house. On many occasions, he threatened to kill Annabella or himself. Only a year after the wedding, fearing for the safety of her newborn infant, Ada, Annabella fled home to her parents and filed for a legal separation. She would never see her husband again. He died eight years later while fighting for Greek independence.

Despite the horrors she suffered, not once did Annabella speak ill of Byron, nor did she breathe a word of his dark secret, except to her lawyer to ensure she kept custody of Ada.

Byron, though, abused her to everyone, writing spiteful verses and spreading poisonous rumors. His first biographer, Thomas Moore, declared that Annabella had been lucky to be Byron's wife. How could she have deserted him? He was a poet! A genius! She should have been grateful every time he terrorized her. How cold she was, how unimaginative.

Astonishingly, most biographers have followed in Moore's footsteps, sacrificing Lady Byron to the cult of male genius and castigating her for being too small-minded to understand Byron's freewheeling spirit. "Lady Byron and Her Daughters" is an essential corrective to this history of injustice. Ms. Markus catalogs Lady Byron's contributions to society, her support of educational initiatives and the working poor, and her devotion to her daughter, Ada, Countess of Lovelace—a mathematical genius who recognized the potential power of computers a century before the first one was invented. When Medora, Byron's daughter by his sister, was in desperate straits in France, Lady Byron all but adopted her as a second daughter, providing her with love, shelter and money.

After hearing Annabella's story, it is difficult not to wish that she had stood up for herself in public and countered the attacks she faced. But she had firm ideas about integrity and dignity. She may have left her husband, but this did not mean that she should betray him to the public. For years she refused to do so, until a dear friend coaxed her to write down her memories for her grandchildren. Still, she did not want to harm her family with yet more scandal, and she sought advice from a new young friend, Harriet Beecher Stowe, with whom she had collaborated on the rescue of a slave family from the American South. Stowe advised against publicizing the incest story, as she believed it would further alienate the public.

But after Lady Byron died, Stowe realized that she had made a mistake. Lady Byron's reputation continued to plummet as Byron's stock rose. Stowe attempted to right her old friend's wrongs, publishing the true story of Byron and his half-sister. But even the highly respected Stowe could not check the tide. She was widely criticized for writing an "indecent" article, and her own popularity suffered. Today, her bravery seems admirable. For readers unaware of Stowe's role in the women's-rights movement, Ms. Markus's portrait will be an invaluable surprise.

Lady Byron was attacked for saving herself and her daughter, as though she had no right to safety or to a life apart from her husband. Ms. Markus allows the inescapable connection to today to remain implicit, but it is there all the same. Despite legal reforms and greater awareness of domestic abuse, women still suffer at the hands of their abusers, and, too much of the time, their stories go untold.

—*Ms. Gordon's latest book is "Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Daughter Mary Shelley."*

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