Ada's Algorithm

HOW
LORD BYRON'S DAUGHTER
ADA LOVELACE
LAUNCHED THE
DIGITAL AGE

"[Ada Lovelace], like Steve Jobs, stands at the intersection of arts and technology."
—WALTER ISAACSON, author of *Steve Jobs*

JAMES ESSINGER

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Preface

Maybe you're fascinated by Ada Lovelace already. If not, I hope by the end of *Ada's Algorithm* you will be.

I became intrigued by Ada myself – and soon enthralled by her – while writing my book *Jacquard's Web: How a Hand-Loom Led to the Birth of the Information Age* (2004), by which time a general interest in Ada's work was well established. There is a popular software language called Ada, which was originally developed by the U.S. Department of Defense in the late 1970s to unite a host of different programming languages. In 2009, an international Ada Lovelace Day was launched on London's Southbank to celebrate the achievement of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. There is a Hollywood movie about Ada (written by Shanee Edwards), *Enchantress of Numbers*, in development.

It would, at least at first glance, appear that science has a chequered record of treating women as equals of men. Indeed, female staff at Bletchley Park, the wartime decryption headquarters that cracked German ciphers, were largely unrecognised for their painstaking work. Meanwhile Rosalind Franklin, who did much of the Nobel Prize–winning work on DNA, was ignored in all official recognition of the deduction of the existence of the double helix, to the embarrassment of the male scientists involved.

Whether this is historically a case of sexism or social conditioning of both genders is beyond the scope of this book. (Change is afoot for the future – as Elinor Ostrom quipped on becoming in 2009 the first female Nobel Prize winner for economics, 'I won't be the last.') What is clear,

though, is that there is a surging interest in the history of women who have contributed to and been involved with science.

While Lord Byron, Ada's father, cast a long shadow over her life, she was just over a month old when they parted company forever and so she never met him in any meaningful sense. A much more durable person in her life was Lady Byron, who had been well educated by her enlightened parents and brought up to move in liberal circles. Lady Byron maintained a ferocious control over her daughter's life and, as it would turn out, death.

Ada Lovelace's story is most closely interwoven with that of her close friend Charles Babbage, the scientist who invented the first mechanical computer. Like Babbage, Ada was tireless in the pursuit of knowledge. On Monday, August 14, Ada wrote to him:

> I wish to add my mite towards *expounding & interpreting* the Almighty, & his laws & works, for the most effective use of mankind; and certainly, I should feel it no small *glory* if I were enabled to be one of his most noted prophets (using this word in my own peculiar sense) in this world.

Ada and Babbage's letters became so intimate that they clearly suggest that they had what was essentially a romantic friendship.

Unlike Babbage himself, Ada Lovelace saw beyond the immediate purpose of his inventions. He had little interest in such speculations and appears to have seen his inventions as mere calculators. But Ada believed that a whole new area of discovery awaited once real-world and abstract mathematics could be linked through calculations that were beyond the scope of human abilities. She had a vivid, thrilling and disturbingly prescient vision that such a computer, for example, might handle 'pieces of music of any degree of complexity or extent': a familiar and even everyday truth over a century and a half later but inconceivable to scientists

at the time.

Ada was passionate, kind, imaginative, excitable and emphatic. She loved emphasising words in the letters and documents she wrote by underlining them (such words are italicised in this book where she is quoted). She was regularly in poor health and used mathematics as a way to regain her focus. Later in life, when she was in severe pain from cancer, she would use medication we now recognise as mind-altering drugs. After a long and excruciating battle with the disease that she appears to have suffered without complaint, she died of cancer at thirty-six, the same age at which her father Lord Byron passed away.

One of the fiercest criticisms of Ada is found in *The Little Engines That Could've* (1990), a thesis by Bruce Collier. This thesis, an otherwise shrewd and useful account of Babbage's work, contains much highly informed technical material. But Collier wrote this about Ada:

> There is one subject ancillary to Babbage on which far too *much* has been written, and that is the contributions of Ada Lovelace … It is no exaggeration to say that she was a manic-depressive with the most amazing delusions about her own talents, and a rather shallow understanding of both Charles Babbage and the Analytical Engine … To me, this familiar material seems to make obvious once again that Ada was as mad as a hatter … I will retain an open mind on whether Ada was crazy because of her substance abuse … I guess *someone* has to be the most overrated figure in the history of computing.

I was keen to contact Collier to enquire whether he would, more than twenty years later, still subscribe to this opinion about Ada but unfortunately he passed away some years ago.

In comparison to this modern opinion from someone who never knew Ada, let's see what Charles Babbage himself thought of her. On September 9, 1843, he wrote these words to Michael Faraday, the nineteenth-century polymath who

discovered electrolysis and magnetic induction:

> [T]hat Enchantress who has thrown her magical spell around the most abstract of Sciences and has grasped it with a force which few masculine intellects (in our own country at least) could have exerted over it.

As for claims that Ada was mentally unstable, there simply is no reliable evidence for this and I believe such claims are made, at heart, because some computer historians in the past have not liked the idea that a woman could have to some extent stolen Babbage's thunder, though from posterity's perspective this is exactly what Ada to some extent did. I do think that towards the end of her life, when she was dying in great pain and only had laudanum (a tincture of opium) as an inadequate palliative to ease her desperate situation, Ada was often not herself, but anyone, of either sex, so afflicted would be unlikely to be themselves.

Moreover, on the website of 'The Ada Initiative,' which states its aim as supporting women 'in open technology and culture,' there are some extremely wise and justifiable words on the matter that Ada was mentally unstable or even insane and could not therefore have done any useful intellectual work to help Babbage. As 'The Ada Initiative' points out:

> Interestingly, these arguments are rarely used to question men's authorship of joint works; indeed, mental instability or difficult personalities sometimes seems to add to the reputation of male scientists and mathematicians: Nikola Tesla, John Nash and Isaac Newton to name just a few.

I think this point is very well made. I do indeed believe that accusations of Ada being mentally unstable are unsustainable based upon the documentary evidence available today (which, to be fair to the late Bruce Collier, he may not have fully known about) and that such criticisms are often uttered by men for sexist reasons rather than for having any rational basis. But should we be surprised that men, who

have after all often for centuries been putting women down and relegating women to a secondary role in politics, culture and all branches of the arts and sciences, often feel profoundly uncomfortable about allowing Ada a highly significant place in the pantheon of the greats of the history of computing?

I hope that this book will make clear that Ada Byron, later Countess of Lovelace, Lord Byron's only legitimate daughter, should without doubt be included in that pantheon and on the list of overlooked women who were not encouraged to fulfil their potential merely because of their gender. There has certainly so far been no biography of Ada that fully defends the genius of her thinking, that genius that prompted me to write this book. Ada's grasp of complex questions came with such ease that she was able to see beyond it to regions of speculation and prescience where others needed to work hard to even understand the questions themselves.

In order to make insightful comparisons between Ada's times and ours, we must understand the modern equivalent of the sums of money mentioned in the documentary evidence from her epoch.

A reasonable rule of thumb is that for the first seventy years or so of the nineteenth century (when there was little price inflation), sums of money should be multiplied by about one hundred times to give an approximate idea of what they would be worth today. It is only possible to give an approximate sense; we are dealing with a different economy from our own, and food, drink and the cost of domestic service were disproportionately cheaper than they are now; a fact that was both a cause of, and a reflection of, the great disparity in means between the rich and the poor.

I use this 'hundred times' rule as the basis for the financial comparisons in this book.

1

Poetic Beginnings

Four miles southeast of the city of Canterbury, home to the great Norman cathedral famous the world over, you'll find the small village of Patrixbourne. Pretty and well manicured, the village nestles amidst some of the loveliest countryside in the county of Kent, which has long been known as the 'Garden of England.' Among the many who have praised the county is Charles Dickens, who in *The Pickwick Papers* wrote affectionately of Kent's 'apples, cherries, hops and women.'

Today, on the outskirts of Patrixbourne, a muddy, rutted lane leads to a large field featuring two long parallel rows of lime trees that date back to the late nineteenth century. The trees once bordered a long driveway. A few hundred yards south, a narrow stream called the Nailbourne – a local legend holds that it flows only once every seven years – is spanned by a little bridge made from stone and wood. The bridge dates back to the eighteenth century.

The lime trees and the bridge are the only signs today that there was once a splendid country house here known as Bifrons. The driveway led down to the house and in its day would have been used by horse-drawn coaches heading to the house or leaving it. As for the bridge, and the stretch of the Nailbourne it spans, these were once part of Bifrons' extensive grounds.

Sixty miles from the smoky hubbub of London, Bifrons was an unlikely setting to have nurtured the intellectual development of the most famous woman in the history of technology.

Yet if you'd been visiting the house in the early spring of 1828 and had taken a stroll along one of the footpaths that passed through its grounds, you might have caught a glimpse of a pretty and precocious twelve-year-old girl called Ada Byron playing outside.

Ada had a turbulent and exotic background. She was the only legitimate daughter of the poet Lord Byron, in his day one of the most famous men in the world, notorious for his love affairs with both sexes, for the scandal of his passion for his half-sister Augusta and for his disastrous marriage to Ada's mother, a well-born young woman named Anna Isabella, shortened to Annabella, Milbanke, who had married Byron on the morning of January 2, 1815.

When Byron married Annabella, he was already famous throughout Britain, Europe and beyond, as much for his amorous adventures as for his poetry.

Annabella put up with him for only a short period. During what was a nightmarish twelve months for her, but business as usual for Byron, the young couple were constantly harassed by creditors chasing debts incurred by Byron's fabulously extravagant expenditure on anything that caught his fancy.

The couple had a major cash-flow crisis because a dowry Annabella's parents had promised hadn't yet arrived. Her parents may have worried that once Byron got his hands on it, he'd leave her – and the dowry never did arrive during the one year and a fortnight that Annabella and Byron were together.

He himself regularly harangued his wife during the marriage with crazy outbursts, including declarations that she made him feel he was 'in hell.' He made love to Annabella whenever he could, but he was also comprehensively unfaithful to her, notably with his half-sister Augusta and an actress named Susan Boyle, though probably with other women too.

Augusta and Byron shared a father rather than a mother. Incest was by no means rare at the time, when poverty, overcrowding and cold houses meant that several people

often slept in the same bed, even in large aristocratic houses. In fact, the aristocracy regarded incest between non-uterine siblings as reasonably acceptable. Byron saw Augusta as fair game. Augusta herself wasn't much concerned by the technicalities either. She just adored her half-brother.

Ada was born on Sunday, December 10, 1815. Annabella, having decided she could take no more of her husband, stole away with Ada from a sleeping Byron in the early morning of Monday, January 15, 1816.

Annabella and Byron had made love on the night before her morning departure. Despite having fled her husband, Annabella initially retained some affection for him. She and Ada went to stay with Annabella's parents in Seaham, County Durham. From there, she wrote doting letters to Byron, but her parents heard how he had treated their daughter, and slowly turned her against him.

Details of the disastrous marriage soon got out, not directly from Annabella herself but from her lady friends. Annabella knew this, and had realised when she 'confided' in them that they would tell the world. Within a month after Annabella had fled from Byron, the disastrous marriage was the talk of the nation's drawing-rooms. Soon, fresh rumours began to circulate that Byron had slept with Augusta during the marriage.

Byron, oppressed by debts, by the outcry over his marriage and by his conviction that England didn't deserve a poet as great as him, departed from his native land on Thursday, April 25, 1816, three months and ten days after Annabella had left him.

Even the sumptuous gilded coach in which Byron and his friends travelled down to the Kentish seaport of Dover hadn't been paid for; bailiffs seeking the price of it pursued him. Byron's coach, a replica of one of Napoleon's, cost £500 (perhaps £50,000 today) or would have cost if Byron had paid for it. The pursuit soon grew more intense. He boarded a ship just in time, taking his luxurious conveyance with him.

The bailiffs, with no legal right to pursue him beyond the shores of England, remained in Dover, staring out in frustration at the bubbling English Channel.

The Channel was indeed bubbling as if heated by hell-fire. Byron escaped his creditors, lovers, Annabella's wrath, Augusta, England and mundane reality in a 'rough sea and contrary wind,' as John Hobhouse, a close friend from Byron's university days, reported.

The weather during the crossing to Ostend, a seventy-five-mile journey, was so harsh the voyage took a nightmarish sixteen hours when it should have lasted less than half as long. During the horrible passage, Byron – amidst bouts of seasickness – wrote the first three stanzas of the third canto of his long poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The first two cantos had been published, to great success, in 1812. He scratched his anguish at leaving Ada onto paper as the furious waves battered the ship in the darkness, and as England, and all that England meant to him, receded into oblivion:

Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child!
Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart?
When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled,
And then we parted, – not as now we part,
But with a hope. –
    Awaking with a start,
The waters heave around me; and on high
The winds lift up their voices: I depart,
Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by
When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad
mine eye.

Yet Byron's emotional convalescence didn't last much beyond his landfall at Ostend. When he finally reached the port, he celebrated his new freedom by seducing the chambermaid of his hotel room as soon as he had checked in.

2

Lord Byron: A Scandalous Ancestry

The little boy fated to become Lord Byron the poet, Ada's father, was the son of John Byron, who had been born on February 7, 1756.

John's older brother William – known as the 'Wicked Lord,' whose crimes included stabbing a neighbour to death during a ferocious argument over the best way to hang game – held the title of Lord Byron, which was awarded the previous century to the Byron family by King Charles I. The Wicked Lord managed to escape the hangman's noose by persuading his peers in the House of Lords that the crime was manslaughter rather than murder. He was absolved from his crime on the condition he paid a fine and retired to Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire, the ancestral home of the Byron family. Founded in the late twelfth century, its priory status had come to an end in 1539, when it was closed by King Henry VIII due to his falling-out with the Roman Catholic Church over his marriage to Anne Boleyn; he granted it to the Byron family.

John Byron, Ada's grandfather, was nominally a British army officer, but he spent as much time as he could philandering and spending money that wasn't his. These two pastimes had always been popular among the Byrons, who traced their ancestry back to a Ralph du Biron, who came to England in 1066 with William the Conqueror and his horde of fortune-hunters and land-robbers. John Byron soon acquired the nickname of 'Mad Jack.' Mad he might have been, but he was also a handsome fellow. Before long he lost

interest in his profession and, in the family tradition, devoted himself to dissipation.

John Byron's first wife, Amelia, had an annual income of £4,000 – worth about £400,000 today – which was presumably one reason why Mad Jack married her. Their daughter, Augusta Mary, was born in Paris on January 26, 1784, and is an important character in Ada's story. Amelia Byron did not survive Augusta's birth, and the girl was cared for, most probably, by an uncle. The causes of Amelia's actual death remain a sinister mystery: sources vary between stating that she died of consumption (this usually meant tuberculosis), of a fever contracted when she went hunting too soon after giving birth, or even of 'ill-usage' at her husband's hands. Some reports hold that her death took place in Paris, but her death certificate states that she died in London.

Whatever the true cause of Amelia's demise, her income died with her, and as Mad Jack had by now abandoned his military career, he needed cash badly.

In the traditional way of handsome aristocratic rakes who did not want to do anything as tedious and time-consuming as earn a living, Mad Jack ventured to Bath, a famous west-of-England spa town whose very name proclaims its primary historical function. The Romans had pioneered bathing in the supposedly healthy water. By the eighteenth century, Bath was still famous for its waters, and also for the opportunities it offered impoverished noblemen for finding a wealthy heiress.

Before long, Jack's good looks and easy charm had enabled him to do precisely that. The lady he successfully wooed ticked all his boxes of youth, wealth and vulnerability.

The lady, Catherine Gordon, was Scottish, a big girl and rather ungainly in her manner, though she enjoyed dancing and was good-natured. Catherine was the oldest and by that time the only living daughter of George Gordon, twelfth Laird of Gight. Catherine was born in the County of Aberdeen in 1764, and brought up in the Castle of Gight, which is in the parish of Fyvie in the Formartine district of

Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

Catherine had plenty of money due to her family inheritance. Mad Jack was as interested in Catherine's money as in Catherine, and indeed probably more so. The Byrons were not famous for the longevity of their virtue, or of their marriages. Soon after the happy couple were united, Mad Jack – relishing the prospect of living in a castle, and even more delighted at the juicy prospect of gaining comprehensive access to Catherine's money – began an orgy of spending.

Married women had few legal rights at the time and were not even regarded as a separate legal entity from their husband. Any money a woman had automatically became her husband's once they were married.

Poor Catherine – well, she would be poor soon, anyway – fell head over heels for Mad Jack, but only because in the classic fashion of rakes, he'd been careful to disguise his true nature until after the wedding.

Within a year of the marriage being solemnised, John Byron had spent much of his wife's fortune. Before she met him, she had about £22,000 (£2.2 million today). The inheritance rapidly disappeared, even to the extent of forests on Gight land being felled in order for the timber to be sold and the money to line Mad Jack's pockets for the brief tenure it had in them before being expended on some insane frivolity.

Within eighteen months of the marriage, there was almost no money left in the estate, and what was still there was paid to Mad Jack's new creditors because, in common with many of his Byron forebears, he wasn't only content to spend money he had, but also money he didn't. Catherine remained not only in love with her husband but infatuated with him. The scale of his financial extravagance, however, upset her profoundly.

Before long, the threat of jail for debt induced Mad Jack to flee to Paris. Flitting off to the Continent was the usual Byron technique for dealing with debt. By the end of 1787, Catherine – unwilling, despite her persisting love for her

husband, to spend any more time in Paris living in straitened circumstances – returned to London. She was left only with the income from about £4,200 (around £420,000) that her trustees had managed to sequester from her husband.

Mad Jack couldn't join her in London because if he had, he would have been jailed for debt right away. By now, Catherine was pregnant. On January 22, 1788, her son and only child came into this world. Catherine named him George Gordon, after her father.

The future poet Lord Byron was born with a caul, a harmless natural membrane, over his head. In medieval times, a caul was seen as a mark that a child born with one would be destined for greatness. Dried cauls were believed to prevent their owner from drowning. Some were sold for significant sums to sailors and there is a reference to this practice in the opening paragraphs of Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* (1850). There were no takers for David's caul, but baby George's was given to a professional sailor Catherine knew. George came into this world with a deformed right foot, which would cause him physical and psychological pain throughout his life. The deformity was at the time referred to as a club foot. Today, the condition is known medically as talipes. Byron's right leg was thinner than it should have been and his long narrow foot curved inwards and was so stiff that it affected the movement of the ankle. Byron's walk, throughout his life, had a certain sliding gait to it, which everyone noticed. All the same, this was a time when many people had something more or less wrong with them, so Byron's problem would not have been as conspicuous as it would have been today.

Catherine was deeply (and, based on his track record, most likely justifiably) concerned that even now her husband, living in Paris, was accruing more debts. Certainly, the pressure on what money Catherine still had was apparently endless. Mad Jack was unable to get credit and was reduced to living only on bread. He was by now also dangerously ill

with tuberculosis. On June 21, 1791, he made his will, thoughtlessly making his penniless son (four years old at the time) responsible for his, the father's, debts. Six weeks later, on August 2, 1791, John Byron died at the age of thirty-five.

Catherine bravely contrived to manage on what money she had left. She sent George to a variety of schools in London. Finally she returned to Scotland and there, in 1794, when George Byron was six years old, he was enrolled at Aberdeen Grammar School.

Mad Jack's demented older brother, the Wicked Lord, was still alive at this point, but when he died four years later the ten-year-old George became the sixth Lord Byron. On hearing the news, the headmaster of Aberdeen Grammar School called George into his office, informed the boy of his momentous social elevation, and gave him a glass of port, as if determined to welcome the boy symbolically into the bibulous world of the aristocracy.

In 1798, becoming a peer was seen as becoming a new kind of semi-divine being. Early in August of that year, Catherine and the ten-year-old Lord Byron, accompanied by his nanny Mary Gray, whom he called May, journeyed to Newstead Abbey, where he took possession of his estate. The boy was delighted with Newstead Abbey and spent a month or so roaming the grounds.

Nanny May was a woman of considerably loose virtue. She had regular romantic adventures with young men of about her own age, seventeen or eighteen.*

According to Byron's friend John Hobhouse – who later in Byron's life was told about these events by the poet himself – during this time when May Gray was Byron's nursemaid, she started taking the boy into her bed and masturbating him. Her interest in Byron, though, was not only that of a sexual initiator. She liked to alternate the masturbation with beatings; for which actual or imagined offences is not clear. May even enjoyed showing off to her male companions the power she had over Byron and she enjoyed beating the boy while they looked on. Very likely, the young Byron also witnessed the drunken copulations of May and her friends.

It was the beatings, not the masturbation, that young George Byron finally reported to his mother. When Catherine heard from her son that May was flogging him, Catherine dismissed May and removed Byron from Newstead Abbey. His education continued in London. At the age of thirteen, Byron entered Harrow School, at that time, with Eton, one of the two most renowned schools in Britain.

Life at Harrow was tough. You had to get up at six o'clock, and lessons continued for twelve hours, with some breaks for mealtimes. Floggings administered on younger boys by senior boys and by masters were commonplace; for the floggers, they were a high point of the school routine.

Academic standards could be high, but the syllabus was fairly unvaried. This was 1801 and the syllabus of Britain's public schools was mostly classical, with the intention of turning young men (there were very few schools that gave much of a classical education to young women) into proxy citizens of the great Roman Empire that had collapsed due to Barbarian predations about 1,400 years ago, but which still had an enormous cultural hold on the Anglo-Saxon mentality. This was partly at least because the Britons admired the way the Romans had built up their empire: with violence, yes, but also with a genuine concern for the welfare of the governed.

One of Byron's schoolfellows was to become important in Ada's life. This was the young Robert Peel, also born in 1788, though Peel was born on February 5 and so was Byron's junior by exactly two weeks. Byron, later in his life, was generous about Peel's talents.

Byron was prone to bouts of depression, and may even have suffered from a form of manic depression (nowadays known as bipolar syndrome). Byron often seems to have used sex more as a diversion and as a way of forgetting his own low spirits than as a supreme physical and spiritual pleasure. He was in addition often curiously passive in courtship; when he reached adulthood and had many female (and male) admirers, they often found it frustrating that they had to initiate things.

Indeed, Byron was also sometimes as intensely taken with

chastity as with sexuality. His life's work fills a closely printed book of almost 900 pages, and a man who spends most of his life indulging himself sexually and who dies at the age of thirty-six, is not likely to produce such a vast body of work – maybe around one million words in total. So while certainly Byron had bouts of energetic indulgence in sex, he wasn't always, so to speak, in the mood.

He was certainly bisexual. While at Harrow, he fell ardently in love with a younger boy called John Edleston. The social and moral atmosphere of Harrow was much of the time literally a hotbed of homosexual activity. The poet and critic John Addington Symonds (1840–1893), himself bisexual, was one of the first to write explicitly about homosexuality in nineteenth-century Britain, when homosexual practices were still an imprisonable offence. Addington Symonds wrote this in his memoirs of Harrow, which he started attending in 1854:

> Every boy of good looks had a female name, and was recognised either as a public prostitute or as some bigger fellow's bitch. Bitch was the word in common usage to indicate a boy who yielded his person to a lover. The talk of the dormitories and the studies was incredibly obscene. Here and there, one could not avoid seeing acts of onanism, mutual masturbation, the sports of naked boys in bed together. There was no refinement, no sentiment, no passion; nothing but animal lust in these occurrences.

In the summer of 1808, Byron visited his friend Lord Grey de Ruthyn, who was about eight years older than Byron. Grey made advances to him which were evidently not repulsed. The poet and lyricist Thomas Moore writing in his own biography of Byron, said that an intimacy sprang up between Byron and Grey.

Byron liked to use the phrase 'pure relationship' to describe one which did not involve actual penetrative intercourse. It is not, however, known what 'intimacy' meant in terms of

Byron and Grey. All that is certain is that Byron was himself conscious of his early sexual initiation. In 'Detached Thoughts' – a journal he kept for a few months in 1821–1822 when he was living in Pisa, Italy – he admitted:

> My passions were developed very early – so early – that few would believe me – if I were to state the period – and the facts which accompanied it.

On Monday, July 1, 1805, Byron travelled to Cambridge to become a student at Trinity College, the largest and probably the most famous of the colleges of Cambridge University. In Byron's time there was only one path to the degree, which was the Senate House Examination (SHE). The SHE was continually developing. At that time it was partially oral but mostly written, with the main subject of examination being mathematics, though a little classics and moral philosophy were thrown in too. However, most noblemen such as Byron treated Cambridge as a sort of finishing school and stayed only for one or two years, generally failing to graduate or even to make an attempt to do so.†

Byron certainly lived large. He kept three horses and acquired a carriage soon after arriving in Cambridge. What he thought of the university was hardly complimentary. 'This place is wretched enough,' he wrote, 'a villainous chaos of din and drunkenness, nothing but hazard and burgundy, hunting, mathematics and Newmarket, riot and racing.'

Within less than a year of his arrival he had borrowed hundreds of pounds from a money-lender at a high rate of interest. Byron wrote to his impoverished mother that he had 'a few hundred in ready cash lying by me' and went on to tell her that he could learn nothing at Cambridge and would prefer to go abroad.

Appalled, his mother Catherine wrote to John Hanson, a young married London lawyer who had befriended her before Byron was born and even lent Catherine money when she needed it. It was John Hanson's brother, a Royal Navy captain, who had been given the caul in which Byron was

born. Catherine wrote:

> That boy will be the death of me, and drive me mad! I will never consent to his going abroad. Where can he get hundreds. Has he got into the hands of money-lenders. He has no feeling, no heart. This I have long known: he has behaved as ill as possible for years back. This bitter truth I can no longer conceal; it is wrung from me by heart-rending agony.

Byron didn't go abroad but stayed on at university, where he spent much of his energy in crash dieting (he was prone to plumpness), boxing, gambling and sex, though he didn't seem to enjoy any of it particularly and was convinced that he would never be happy.

On January 22, 1808, when Byron was twenty, his debts amounted to £5,000 (around £500,000 today). At that age he had no source of income other than what he received from his mother, who was herself usually strapped for cash. Instead of curbing his personal expenditure, Byron asked Hanson to raise the rents paid by tenants who lived in cottages in Newstead's grounds. Byron also told Hanson to insist that the Newstead servants provide themselves with their own food rather than run up food bills for which Byron would be liable.

Byron was well aware that the most sensible course of action to deal with his ever-escalating debts (they were soon starting to run towards £15,000) was to sell Newstead Abbey. The problem was, though, that Byron loved Newstead too much to sell it.

Instead of making a definite decision about his ancestral home, Byron travelled to the Continent with Hobhouse and four servants to escape his increasingly persistent creditors. Byron's Grand Tour, which took place in warm southern European countries, naturally included Greece, and it was in Greece that Byron started writing the great poem which was eventually to feature the daughter who was still close to seven years from being born: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

When Byron returned to London in July 1811, he was depressed at being back in Britain and in serious debt. In addition, his mother died on August 1. Resuming his life of writing poetry, being poor and borrowing, socialising and snatching such sexual opportunities as he could, he made his maiden speech in the House of Lords in February 1812, opposing the harsh Tory measures against riotous Nottingham weavers.

Byron's life changed radically when, at the beginning of March 1812, the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* were published, soon in ten editions issued prior to the publication in 1816 of the third canto of the poem. When the fourth canto was published in 1818, by which time Ada was a toddler, the enthusiasm for the fourth canto led readers to ask that the whole poem be printed together as a single book. There is a reliable estimate that between 15,000 and 20,000 copies were printed.

Byron, as he recalled in his memoirs, had awoken one morning and had found himself famous. It fanned his love life considerably. Soon he found himself – not entirely of his own volition – involved in a liaison with the passionate and fairly eccentric aristocrat and novelist Lady Caroline Lamb (she famously remarked of Byron that he was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'). After their liaison collapsed, he began a relationship with Lady Oxford, who was a patron on the reform movement and about fourteen years older than Byron.

Meanwhile, Byron appears to have entered into a sexual relationship with his half-sister Augusta, then married to a Colonel George Leigh, too. There remained, however, the small problem of Byron's debts. While there is no doubt that his publisher, John Murray, earned a small fortune, Byron seems to have thought it vulgar to take money for his poetry. On at least one occasion, Byron asked his publisher, John Murray, to give away 1,000 guineas that Byron was owed as royalties for his poems (a guinea was one pound and one shilling, and was often used as the currency in genteel transactions). This sum, 1,000 guineas (that is, 1,000 pounds plus 1,000 shillings; and as there were 20 shillings in a

pound, 1,000 guineas was in effect 1,050 pounds), was a vast amount indeed. What he needed rather more than another lover was a rich wife: Annabella Milbanke, for example.

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[*] Gray was Scottish and fond of discipline. Her sister Agnes had previously been Byron's nursemaid. I haven't been able to find out exactly how old May was when she looked after Byron, but judging from the fact that by 1798, a married Agnes was living in Woodside, a working-class district of Aberdeen, with two children of her own, it seems logical to assume that May was younger than Agnes and that Agnes was in her late teens or early twenties by 1798. This would mean that May was probably about seventeen or eighteen when she was Byron's nursemaid.

[†] From Trinity College (Cambridge) Archivist Jon Smith.

3

Annabella: Anglo-Saxon Attitudes

Annabella Milbanke (she was christened Anne Isabella but was generally called Annabella) was the daughter of a wealthy family that dwelt at Seaham Hall in the small town of Seaham, about fifteen miles south of Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the coast of North East England. Annabella was born on May 17, 1792, and so she was about three years and eight months younger than Byron.

The surviving portraits of Annabella don't suggest she was a great beauty. She had an excellent figure but a rather snub face with pronounced, apple-like cheeks. While her considerable intelligence cannot be doubted, by nature she was reserved, pedantic and not especially good company. She was an only child and when she was born her mother was over forty. Her parents doted on her and gave her full encouragement to think highly of herself and her opinions. Up in the provincial north of England, Annabella was a proud and wealthy fish in a small pond, but when she ventured down to London she encountered many women who were more beautiful, wittier and considerably more sexually forthcoming than she was.

On Sunday, March 15, 1812, Annabella was down from Seaham for her second London season. The 'season' was the period, usually from the spring to late summer, when eligible young women from wealthy families – the women were known as debutantes – spent time in London's social scene, meeting new people and, hopefully, a prospective husband. The importance of the season had evolved in the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries, and peaked in its traditional form in the early twentieth century. It was once usual for debutantes to be presented to the monarch as part of their season.

That Sunday, March 15, Annabella wrote in her journal of a dinner she had with her relatives, the Melbournes. As she said: 'Julius Caesar, Lord Byron's new poem, and politics were the principal themes in conversation.'

By March 24, Annabella had read the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Her praise of it in her journal was not – predictably, if you knew Annabella – unqualified. She conceded that Byron excelled in the 'delineation of deep feeling, and in reflections relative to human nature' but she also wrote that he was too much of a mannerist: a word she emphasised in her journal. It never seems to have occurred to Annabella that her analysis of him might be irrelevant to the chaotic and impulsively emotional way in which he lived his life.

The first time she set eyes on Byron was at a waltzing party given by Lady Caroline Lamb on Wednesday, March 25, 1812. Annabella found the whole experience of being in London, and in the company of eminent and famous people, intoxicating. By now Byron was a celebrity, one of the most famous men in England. Annabella gave Byron close attention. She was naïve for her years, understandable perhaps since her parents were quite old. Also, her upbringing had been sheltered and she had had no siblings. It's difficult not to conclude that she simply didn't realise that Lady Caroline and Byron were having an affair. Instead what she saw, as she later wrote, was a man in a 'desolate situation,' surrounded by unworthy admirers and friends who didn't care for him.

Annabella's father was already wealthy, but he was additionally the heir to an even greater fortune that could reasonably be expected to come to Annabella after his death. There's no doubt that Annabella, the intelligent but awkward, judgmental and naïve wallflower, was extremely (albeit temporarily) attractive to Byron.

Annabella confided to her journal her own thoughts on meeting him:

> I saw Lord Byron for the first time. His mouth continually betrays the acrimony of his spirit. I should judge him sincere and independent – sincere at least in society as far as he can be, while dissimulating the violence of his scorn. He very often hides his mouth with his hand when speaking.

Annabella decided she had found a mind that matched her own:

> It appeared to me that he tried to control his natural sarcasm and vehemence as much as he could, in order not to offend, but at times his lips thickened with disdain and his eyes rolled impatiently.

Annabella and Byron became friends, sort of. It's not entirely clear how, but she was getting better known socially, and Byron got to know her. That he felt any sudden intense attraction for her seems unlikely. Inasmuch as posterity can ever know how Byron felt at any moment of his life, his initial feelings for Annabella appear to have been a mixture of boredom and gloominess, though mingled with a flickering curiosity over whether at some point he might be able to get her into bed.

Annabella seems to have continued to be oblivious to the fact that the literary hero she found so fascinating was having an affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, and Lady Caroline and Byron didn't take any steps to disabuse her of this illusion. Except that in the summer of 1812, Caroline sent Annabella a drunken letter warning her against 'fallen angels who are ever too happy to twine themselves round the young Saplings they can reach.'

The letter very likely influenced her to reject a half-hearted marriage proposal Byron made to her in October 1812. It was a bizarre proposal, since Byron was close friends with Annabella's aunt Lady Melbourne, and together they

delighted in gossip about Annabella's pedantry and moral rectitude. Lady Melbourne was cut from a different cloth. During her own heyday, she had been notorious for her liberal granting of sexual favours to a wide range of aristocrats: one of them was rumoured to have bought her off another for £13,000. She had had numerous children born in wedlock by different aristocrats. Though one of the most well known and influential society hostesses of the period, she was fifteen years older than Byron's mother and theirs was a libertine friendship that remained pure.

Back in Seaham, on a lonely Sunday, August 22, 1813, however, Annabella was staying with her parents and was obviously missing the excitement of London and her conquest of sorts: Lord Byron, the man whose name had been on everyone's lips. She sought to resuscitate her friendship with him by letter after sounding out her aunt, Lady Melbourne. After the failed marriage proposal and presumably declaration of his love, she appeared unsure of their relationship and the letter has no salutation, though it is signed formally 'Yours faithfully, A. Milbanke.' As she wrote:

> You have remarked the serenity of my countenance, but mine is not the serenity of one who is a stranger to care, nor are the prospects of my future years untroubled. It is my nature to feel long, deeply and secretly, and the strangest affections of my heart are without hope. I disclose to you what I conceal even from those who have most claim to my confidence because it will be the surest basis of that unreserved friendship which I wish to establish between us – because you will not reject my admirations as the result of cold calculation when you know that I *can* suffer as you have suffered.

With little to do in Seaham and hearing no fresh news about him, she laid out an ambitious plan for Byron's wellbeing. She offered him the following pedantic and patronizing guidance:

> No longer suffer yourself to be the slave of the moment,

> nor trust your noble impulses to the chances of life. Have an object that will permanently occupy your feelings and exercise your reason. Be good.
>
> Feel benevolence and you will inspire it. You *will* do good.

Annabella's letter to Byron started a strange correspondence in which they deepened their intimacy without actually meeting, rather like two people who first get in touch via an internet dating site.

For Annabella, who delighted in writing pedantic criticism of people she knew in Seaham, the medium of correspondence was perfect. She could continue to pursue her fond theory about Byron: that he was misunderstood by most people and was really a sensitive and admirable person who would respond to the doting love of a cautious and prudent individual such as her.

As 1813 progressed into the autumn, Annabella began to fancy herself in love. In early October 1813 she sent her aunt Lady Melbourne (with whom she warily 'felt little sympathy' in summer) her reactions to Byron's poem *The Giaour*. As Annabella wrote:

> The description of Love almost makes *me* in love. Certainly he excels in the language of passion … I consider his acquaintance as so desirable that I would risk being called a Flirt for the sake of enjoying it, provided I may do so without detriment to myself – for you know that his welfare has been as much the object of my consideration as if it were connected with his own.

Byron, at this time, was writing at Augusta's home at the small village of Six Mile Bottom near Newmarket in Cambridgeshire. In response to Lady Melbourne's attempts to caution him against an affair with Augusta, Byron wrote to Lady Melbourne that he thought the risk he ran was 'worth while,' but said 'I can't tell you why – and it is *not* an *'Ape'* and if it is – that must be my fault.' What exactly he meant

by Ape is not clear; he might have meant the common idea that the child of incest would be an ape.

Nonetheless, on November 10, 1813, Byron wrote to Annabella that he was writing another poem, also set in Turkey, and that he would like to send her a copy. This poem was *The Bride of Abydos*. In the same letter he enquired when she was likely to be in town and flirtatiously added: 'I imagine I am about to add to your thousand and one pretendants' and 'I have taken exquisite care to prevent the possibility of that.'

While Annabella remained on Byron's short list, he by no means saw her as his only candidate. On March 22, 1814, Byron noted in his journal that he might marry Lady Charlotte Leveson-Gower, apparently because (as Byron put it) 'she is a friend of Augusta, and whatever she loves, I can't help liking.'

Fanned by Lady Melbourne – who no doubt had also provided Byron with an informed view of Annabella's financial future – Annabella was now deeply in love. 'Pray write to me,' she begged Byron on June 19, 1814, 'for I have been rendered uneasy by your long silence, & you cannot wish me so.' And on August 6, 1814, Annabella wrote coquettishly to Byron to question whether he should come to Seaham as there might be a danger that he felt 'more than friendship' towards her.

All this time, Byron had continued wooing Lady Charlotte Leveson-Gower, his main prospect – marrying rather than writing for gain being the more noble pursuit. But in a major setback, on September 8 or 9, 1814, Lady Charlotte wrote to Byron to tell him that her family had other plans for her romantically.

Byron, confronted with this news, panicked. 'I could not exist without some object of attachment,' he often acknowledged during this time and scrambled to get one and decided it would be Annabella. He showed the draft of his proposal to Augusta, who said: 'Well, this is a very pretty letter; it is a pity it shall not go. I never read a prettier one.' 'Then it *shall* go,' said Byron.

Annabella, overjoyed, accepted at once. Byron, busy with literary business and with telling his friends about his forthcoming marriage, was in no hurry, however, to visit his prospective wife.

It was only when Annabella wrote to him on October 22, 1814, to tell him that a wealthy childless uncle of hers, Lord Wentworth, had journeyed some three days to the Milbanke home at Seaham from Leicestershire expressly to meet Byron and had been most disappointed not to find him there. She added, 'It is odd that my task should be to pacify the old ones, and teach *them* patience. They are growing quite ungovernable, and I must have your assistance to manage them.'

On the way to his betrothed, Byron stopped off to see Augusta and her husband Colonel Leigh who was staying with his wife, as he sometimes did. The colonel was not at all happy to learn of Byron's impending marriage, as the colonel had hoped Augusta would be Byron's only heir.

There was a more welcoming reception at Seaham. Byron was buoyed by his meeting with Lord Wentworth, who had announced he now intended to make Annabella his heiress by his will. Then there was Annabella's family who said they would be providing a dowry of £20,000 (about £2 million today). This would be immediate help to alleviate his debts, which had mounted to a monumental £30,000 at the time, nowadays worth about £3 million.

On the morning of his wedding, Monday, January 2, 1815, Byron awoke in gloomy spirits, but with a determination to go ahead with the deed. By eleven o'clock in the morning Byron and Annabella were man and wife. At Six Mile Bottom, at that very hour when Augusta knew the vows would have been completed, she felt, as she put it, 'as the sea trembles when the earth quakes.'

'*Had* Lady Byron on the sofa before dinner,' Byron laconically reported on his marriage day in his memoirs which were partly remembered by various friends who had seen some of

the memoirs prior to their destruction.

The newlywed couple had arranged to spend the first few days of their wedded bliss at a Yorkshire country house, Halnaby, that belonged to the Milbanke family. Arriving at Halnaby, the ground was covered in deep snow. The servants and tenants of the Milbankes were waiting in the wintry weather to greet Annabella and Byron. A reliable source testifies that when the carriage stopped, Byron at once jumped out and walked away, not bothering to help Lady Byron down from the carriage.

As to Annabella's demeanour on arrival at Halnaby, there is conflicting evidence about this. An old butler who was there among the welcoming party remembered that Annabella came up the steps of Halnaby alone 'with a countenance and frame agonised and listless with evident horror and despair.'

A maid who had accompanied them on the journey, however, recalled her mistress as being as 'buoyant and cheerful as a bride can be.' In any event, that very same night, Annabella later recalled, Byron enquired 'with an appearance of aversion, if I meant to sleep in the same bed with him.' He often complained to Annabella, during the marriage, 'it's done,' 'it's too late now,' and, 'it cannot be undone.'

Byron grew a little calmer as the weeks wore on, but when living with Annabella he was always prone to terrible moods. Byron took Annabella to Six Mile Bottom and introduced her to Augusta. It was torture. Byron and Augusta often left Annabella alone, even all night, and sometimes Byron even taunted his wife that he and Augusta had 'no need' of her.

He liked to play off the women against each other. For example, on one occasion, according to Annabella's testimony for a Deed of Separation from her husband, he threatened to 'work them both well' and lay himself down on the sofa, then ordered them to take it in turns to embrace him, while he made comparisons between them in gross language.

Strangely when Annabella finally suspected that her

husband was having sexual relations with Augusta as well as with her, Annabella didn't blame Augusta, telling herself (and, eventually, others) that Augusta submitted to Byron, but that Augusta was not gratified by his affection. Some biographers have even suggested that Annabella and Augusta had lesbian feelings for each other, though there is no definite evidence of this.

Augusta, during the rest of her life, wrote Annabella hundreds of letters; Augusta was always weirdly fascinated by Annabella, and although Annabella didn't reciprocate as keenly, Annabella still had a great fondness for Byron's half-sister. There were even some times of affection between Byron and Annabella. During one of these episodes in March 1815, or possibly late February, Ada was conceived.

In April 1815, the Byrons settled in London, in a house on 13 Piccadilly Terrace that they could not remotely afford, even though Lord Wentworth conveniently died on April 17. From now on regular harassment by bailiffs and other creditors became part of their married life.

In the persisting absence of the dowry (estates such as her uncle's took years to settle before funds would become available; it would take about a decade), Byron remained fearsomely in debt. While Byron and Annabella still managed to find time for occasional moments of passion and togetherness – they both added her mother's family name 'Noel' as a double-barrel to theirs upon the death of her uncle – these moments were snatched more and more in the face of stress caused by debts, Byron's emotional instability and his sexual infidelity.

On Sunday, December 10, 1815, at 1:00 p.m., Annabella gave birth to a girl, Augusta Ada, though soon Annabella preferred to call her only 'Ada.'

Byron and Annabella had decided Augusta would be godmother. The very fact that Annabella agreed to this (she was not the kind of woman to be coerced into something so major) suggests that her sympathies for, and perhaps affinity

for, Augusta were strong.

When Byron was shown his healthy newborn daughter, he reputedly said, 'Oh! What an instrument of torture I have acquired in you!'

Annabella had by now decided that her husband had been her own instrument of torture for long enough. But she kept her intentions carefully secret, and on the night of Sunday, January 14, 1816, she went to bed with Byron as usual.

Early in the morning, Annabella wrapped herself and her month-old baby daughter up warmly. Without waking her husband, she stole out of their London house in the company of a maidservant and into a carriage that would take the three of them away from Byron and to Annabella's parents.

Byron would never see his wife, or Ada, again.

4

The Manor of Parallelograms

Ada's early life was spent in the public spotlight of a scandalised and titillated Britain, though her mother did her utmost to keep her out of its glare. To some extent, Lady Byron (as it seems appropriate to call her now, as she was known by this name to most of the world) was successful in this quest, though Ada was never truly out of the public's mind.

Lady Byron had left the strange, wayward, selfish and fundamentally unhappy man she had mistakenly married. And now she found herself in a life she had never planned. Her entire upbringing and attitude to life had been focused on her at some point becoming a wife and a mother.

Lady Byron went to be with her parents in Leicestershire, who at that time were staying at a country house in the village of Kirkby Mallory. Strange to say, despite her having left Byron, for a few weeks the still-married couple exchanged fond letters with each other. Byron seems to have expected that Annabella would soon return to him with Ada.

And maybe that would have happened. But after a few weeks, during which Lady Byron had been reticent with her parents about why she had left Byron, there came a time – it's not known when exactly this happened, but it would have been most likely sometime in February 1816 – she told her parents about what had happened and just how Byron had behaved towards her. Her parents were furious and slowly turned her against him. She also received a note from Byron's former lover, Lady Caroline Lamb, who proposed a meeting

with Annabella.

At this meeting, Lady Caroline told Annabella that Byron had committed incest with Augusta. Lady Caroline, not known for mincing her words, convinced Annabella of the truth, if she still needed convincing after the peculiar cohabitation arrangement at Six Mile Bottom. After Lady Caroline's visit it was also clear beyond doubt that Augusta and Byron's incest with each other had become widely known and discussed, and beyond the borders of Britain as well as within them. Even worse, Lady Caroline told Lady Byron that Byron had indulged in homosexual acts while at Harrow.

There was only one respectable answer, and soon Lady Byron launched a legal suit against Byron for an official separation. As for Byron, he had the last laugh, in his poem *Don Juan* – written in ottava rima pentameters, whereas *Childe Harolde's Pilgrimage* had been written in Spenserian stanzas – he describes Donna Inez, a character in the poem, as follows:

> Her favourite science was the mathematical,
> Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity;
> Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was attic all,
> Her serious sayings darken'd to sublimity;
> In short, in all things she was fairly what I call
> A prodigy – her morning dress was dimity [*a sturdy curtain fabric*] …

By now desperate for cash after flunking the marriage option, Byron knew he had to sell Newstead Abbey to settle debts and for his living expenses abroad. But in fact Newstead was not sold until December 1817, when Byron was fortunate to get the colossal sum of £94,000 (about £9.4 million today) for it from a Colonel Thomas Wildman, a wealthy military officer who had been a classmate of Byron's at Harrow. Though his financial worries were much reduced (they were never completely resolved), it would be unfair to

Byron, though, to say that he forgot about Ada once abroad. During the eight years between his departure from England (he never returned) and his death, he frequently wrote to Augusta to ask her to ask Lady Byron for particulars about Ada, such as her upbringing, the colour of her hair and so on. But he had no contact with her, or thoughts about her upbringing.

Lady Byron was adamant that Ada would be prudently educated. Most adults in the early nineteenth century regarded children as incomplete, ungrateful, savage adults – a view that Ada's friend Charles Dickens would later challenge in his writings. Children were dressed like miniature versions of adults and children's literature – such as it was – was meant for moral guidance. Lady Byron agreed whole-heartedly and was not going to sit by idly or let Ada mix much with other children who hadn't been vetted. As a result, most of Ada's childhood was rather lonely and spent in the company of older and not always congenial people.

Ada's education started when she was only four years old. It was about as comprehensive as was feasible at the time. Not easy to please, Lady Byron was prone to firing the tutors and governesses that she recruited when she considered that they were not sufficiently helpful to Ada's education. When there were extended breaks between tutors due to Lady Byron being unable to find one she considered suitable for her daughter, Lady Byron taught Ada herself.

In 1824, at the age of eight, a typical day for Ada looked like this:

Music	10
French reading	11:15
Arithmetic	11:30
Work	1:30
Music	3:15
French exercise	4:30

Lady Byron imposed a strict discipline on Ada, who altogether was rather like the only girl in a school. Through a ticket-based system Ada was either given a reward or punishment. When Ada performed well, she had paper 'tickets' bestowed on her, but these tickets got confiscated when Ada did not meet Lady Byron's expectations.

On the occasion that the ticket system failed to motivate her, she was placed in a closet until she promised to behave herself and work hard at her studies. Woronzow Greig, a mathematical and pedantic friend of Ada's when she was an adult, recounted that Ada 'acquired a feeling of dread towards her mother that continued until the day of her death,' Ada's death that is.

Lady Byron, whom Byron once nicknamed the 'princess of parallelograms,' was particularly keen for Ada to have a mathematical education. Lady Byron wanted to suppress Ada's imagination – which Lady Byron saw as dangerous and potentially destructive and coming from the Byrons – and wanted to make Ada, as far as feasible, completely rational.

For Lady Byron, Ada was a constant reminder of her marriage and the failure of her life's purpose. Ada, after all, was half Byron by blood, and it's difficult to conclude other than that Lady Byron frequently found her irritating and even treacherous whenever Ada was behaving in a way that made her seem too much of a Byron. She had a particularly deep mistrust of Ada's imaginative approach to science and Ada's tendency to seek playful uses for science and mathematics.

Unlike Lord Byron's savage nature, Ada's was to be chained and guided towards goodness in the way she had laid out in her fateful letter to him after she had rejected his first marriage proposal.

It meant, specifically, that Ada had to be very grateful for corrections she received from adults. As Ada wrote on September 7, 1824:

> I should wish that … you do not give me reward because I think the reward of your being pleased with me sufficient[,] besides when you do that I don't do the

good thing because I know I ought to do it but because I want to obtain the reward, and not because I know it to be right, and if I was encouraged in this, when I was grown up I should be a very disagreeable creature, and I should never do any good without I had a reward.

Ada wrote many such letters as, over time, Lady Byron grew into a woman extremely preoccupied with her health, and prone to following the strangest theories about good health. She was often away at various rest cures, which involved her doing such things as taking the waters in spa towns, and spending time with her aristocratic friends.

On other occasions, Ada was to keep Lady Byron informed with reports that were pleasing to her and showed that she understood the purpose of her upbringing. Thus, on Wednesday, May 31, 1826, ten-year-old Ada castigated vanity in a letter to her mother, who was staying on the sea in Hastings, in a place called Library House. She added: 'I think it is well for me I am not beautiful.'

The next day she wrote again to let her mother know what had occurred that day.

Library House, Hastings
1st June Thursday 1826

My dearest Mammy

No letter from Lady Tarn yet. Louisa [*presumably a friend who was visiting*] is a little better today. She was very much pleased yesterday with a box of the most beautiful things imaginable from Miss Noel. There were beautiful little wee wee baskets, one larger basket, and some pincushions in the form of little guitars, another carriage and Louisa is to have a dozen more carriages of different sorts.

Today I have been doing some Italian, and I have written about Arrowroot, and made out a little alphabetical list of all the things I am going to write about from *Bingley's Useful Knowledge*. There are two dozen different things I wish to write about, and I have

been puzzling hard at a sum in the rule of three which I could not do, the question is if 750 men are allowed 22500 rations of bread per month how many rations will a garrison of 1200 men require?

I think by the time you come back I may have learnt something about decimals, I attempted the double rule of three but I could not understand it, however I will not give it up yet, the book does not teach as well as you do … My purse is getting on beautifully. It is for Louisa's trade and though it is a coarse purple one, I have some thoughts of buying it and giving it to you.

Mrs Montgomery is very kind to me, and I am not *very* unhappy though of course I should be happier if you were here … I get up between six and half past six, breakfast at nine, dine at one, and sup at six. I hope I am not very troublesome … My watch is very useful to me here, I only wish I could wear it … Have you got me a governess yet? …

I must now conclude. If you have too much to do, pray don't write to me at all, I am dying to ride over on horseback to Battle to meet you on Wednesday. I wish above everything that such an arrangement would be made.

Goodbye, yours affectionately
A. Ada Byron.

Lady Byron was often away, and so Ada's letters to her mother frequently give an account of what Ada has been up to. For example, the very first extant letter Ada wrote, which she penned on September 7, 1824, reported:

My dear Mama. I got my fryed fish yesterday. Frank goes today, but he is still Gobblebook for he is reading Captain Hall. I have got a great deal of cold. How is Lady Tamworth. I hope she liked the needlebook … Puff is on the sofa in the drawing room. I am ne[t]ting a purse. I am very sorry Flora is not here for I miss her more than ever.

The letter writing was carefully guided as well. For example, not all the 1824–1826 letters (none before that date are known to exist) in the Lovelace–Byron collection at the Bodleian are in Ada's own handwriting. Several are in the handwriting of one of her governesses presumably, and they frequently start with 'Dear Annabella.' But even when the letter is in Ada's handwriting (as indeed the 'fryed fish' letter is above) there are sometimes sentences that Ada's governess either dictated to her or perhaps helped her to write by suggesting phrases.

What did Ada ask her mother about Byron? Throughout her life she herself seems always to have thought highly of him and to have wished she could see him. But the letters of her youth provide no clue. There is evidence, however, that Lady Byron simply made her father a taboo subject at home. For example, it is known that when Ada was a little girl she asked her mother whether a father and a grandfather were the same. When she asked this question – hardly a wicked one – she was severely rebuked by her mother.

As for Byron himself, despite his inconsistency in emotional matters, he does not indeed appear ever to have stopped caring about Ada and loving her in the way that seemed to suit him best – that is, from a distance. In a letter from Venice to his publisher John Murray on February 2, 1818, when she was two, he wrote:

> I have a great love for little Ada, and I look forward to her as the pillar of my old age, should I ever reach that desolate period, which I hope not.

A year later he writes on June 7, 1819, from Bologna:

> I have not heard of my little Ada, the Electra of my Mycenæ, but there will be a day of reckoning, even should I not live to see it.

He clearly hadn't forgiven Annabella for the failed dowry and marriage and the forced sale of his beloved home Newstead Abbey. Electra plotted revenge (with her brother)

against their mother, Clytemnestra, for the murder of their father, King Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War.

Whether Byron would have been King Agamemnon to Ada's Electra is another matter, at least if his illegitimate daughter Allegra was anything to go by. Allegra was born a little over a year after Ada on Sunday, January 12, 1817. She was the result of a brief affair between Byron and Claire Clairmont, the stepsister of Mary Shelley, wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Allegra was born in the town of Bath, in England as 'Alba,' and when she was a baby lived with her mother and the Shelleys. But when Allegra was fifteen months old, Claire gave her to Byron. Claire was under serious financial pressure and the Shelleys did not want Allegra to live with them. Nor did Byron's half-sister Augusta. So Claire journeyed to Italy to give the baby girl to the baby's father, who had asked Claire to baptise the child 'Allegra Byron.' Byron himself even discussed changing the spelling of Allegra's surname to 'Biron.'

Allegra didn't live with Byron either, but with a succession of people Byron paid to look after her. But she did visit him on occasion. He wrote approvingly to a friend, 'My bastard came three days ago … healthy, noisy and capricious.' 'Bastard' in those times was a more factual and less negative term than it is today.

Byron liked the physical resemblance between Allegra and himself, but he hardly spent any time with her, and she only ever learned Venetian Italian, not English, because she was brought up by paid Venetian carers. In March 1820, he complained that Allegra was 'obstinate as a mule.' At the age of four, Allegra frequently had temper tantrums in front of Byron.

Certainly, the toddler seems often to have behaved badly, but given the circumstances of her upbringing, or lack of, that seems hardly surprising. Like father, like daughter. But Byron's mistress at the time, Teresa Guiccioli, rather liked Allegra and admired the little girl's skill at mimicking the

servants. Teresa also liked Allegra's little voice when she sang.

Teresa was, as far as is known, the last woman for whom Byron had a grand passion. She was small and voluptuous, with lovely auburn curls, and also reportedly had large and luminous eyes. She had a fresh, youthful face and a large bust that some kindly and possibly envious observers thought was so out of proportion with her figure that it made her look dumpy. When Byron met her on Thursday, January 22, 1818, Teresa was both married *and* pregnant, but Byron was not the kind of fellow to let such trivial considerations stand in the way of a grand passion. Teresa's husband, the sinister Count Guiccioli, seems to have encouraged the friendship, partly because, to start with, he thought that it was a platonic one, and also because he was hoping to borrow money from Byron (whether the Count succeeded in this aim does not seem to have been recorded). In the end, the Count let Byron and Teresa sport as they wished; the Count apparently had other women in his life anyway.

As for Allegra, she was, altogether, a charming and spirited little person who, had she been looked after properly, might have made much of her life. But Byron – who was better at being a father at a distance that allowed sentimentality to flourish – regarded Allegra as being in the way. She was packed off to be in the care of the nuns at the Capuchin convent in Bagnacavallo. They looked after her well, but at the age of about five, the poor little mite died, either of typhus or of malaria.

In the thirteen and a half months that Allegra had been at Bagnacavallo, Byron was at Ravenna, only twelve miles away, but had never once been to see his daughter.

There is just one letter, dated September 28, 1821, from little Allegra to her dad. She wrote it from the convent on ruled paper, in Italian, in wobbly childish handwriting. 'My dear Papa,' she writes (*Caro il mio Pappa*), 'it being fair-time, I should like so much a visit from my Papa as I have so many wishes to satisfy. Won't you come to please your Allegra who loves you so?'

Maybe one of the nuns gave Allegra a bit of help. The Mother Superior, whose name was Marianna Fabbri, had included a note from herself that urged Byron to come and see 'Allegrina' and 'where and how she is situated, and let me also add, how much she is loved.'

But Byron could not be bothered to go. He sent both the notes to a friend in Venice, having first scrawled this across Marianna Fabbri's:

> Apropos of Epistles – I enclose you *two* – one from the Prioress of the Convent – & the other from my daughter her pupil which is sincere enough but not very flattering – for she wants to see me because 'it is the fair' – to get some paternal gingerbread – I suppose.

Despite seeing Annabella as Clytemnestra, Byron continued to write to her about Ada. In 1820, he sent a locket with his hair for his five-year-old daughter to carry around with her (it seems unlikely that Annabella was in a hurry to pass this on to Ada) and received a portrait of Ada in return.

Just before his death he asked for 'some account of Ada's disposition, habits, studies, moral tendencies, and temper, as well as her personal appearance.' Annabella wrote back:

> Her prevailing characteristic is cheerfulness and good temper. Observation. Not devoid of imagination, but is chiefly exercised in connection with her mechanical ingenuity – the manufacture of ships, boats, etc.… Tall and robust.

And so Ada, like Allegra, grew up remote from Byron both geographically and emotionally – unaware of her father's warm interest in her. She was frequently ill as a child; her health was never particularly good and she suffered from headaches and all manners of other childhood ailments. When Ada was seven and a half, she became particularly sick. She suffered from an illness that gave her especially sharp headaches and even affected her eyesight in such a way that her doctor ordered her education to be halted. Lord

Byron heard about her illness in 1823, not long after arriving in Greece to help the Greeks fight to win their freedom from the Ottoman Empire.

He was so upset about Ada's illness that he stopped writing in his journal, and his peace of mind about Ada was only to some extent restored when Lady Byron wrote to him in early 1824, saying that Ada felt better.

This correspondence between Byron and his wife was usually carried out via Augusta, with whom Byron was in regular contact, but sometimes Lady Byron wrote to her estranged husband directly.

Byron's life on the Continent had been his usual round of affairs with both sexes, along with travel and writing poetry. But he had eventually found robust and reliable passionate love with Teresa Guiccioli.

After Byron told Teresa he was leaving for Greece she pleaded with her poet lover to let her accompany him, but he refused. Bored, the romantic idea of helping to free the Greeks from the Ottoman Empire was his new grand passion. Soon after arriving in Missolonghi, Byron became ill with flu, which developed into a more severe fever.

He died on Monday, April 19, 1824, cursing his doctors, although according to the account of his valet, the last words Byron actually spoke were: 'Oh, my poor dear child! – my dear Ada! my God, could I have seen her! Give her my blessing …'

An enormous crowd viewed his funeral entourage, which consisted of forty-seven carriages passing through the streets of London. His body lay in state for two days in London, on July 9 and 10, 1824.

Byron's friends led a campaign for him to be buried in Westminster Abbey in Poet's Corner, as a tribute to the quality of his work. But these calls did not find favour and, instead, Byron, who had travelled so far both geographically and emotionally in his life, was buried only about six miles from his ancestral home of Newstead Abbey, in the Byron family vault at the church of St Mary Magdalene in a Nottingham village called Hucknall Torkard, or simply

Hucknall.

Neither Lady Byron nor Ada attended the funeral. Ada did know of it, however, for her September 7, 1824, 'fryed fish' letter above was edged in black in memory of the death of her father.

George Noel Byron, the poet, had been the sixth Lord Byron. The poet's cousin, a naval officer called George Anson Byron, inherited the baronetcy and became the seventh Lord Byron.

This new Lord Byron became a good friend of Lady Byron, presumably because there was no further need for estrangement after Byron's death. And George went with his family – taking along with him his own son and heir, yet another George, who was only eighteen months younger than Ada – to visit Lady Byron and Ada.

Clearly Lady Byron was keen for the vacuum of 'Lord Byron' to be filled and to encourage Ada's idea of kinship. On September 13, 1824, Ada wrote to George, a cousin several times removed, calling him her 'dearest brother,' an affectionate letter whose ideas no doubt came from the adults around her.

> My dearest brother, for so my love I can justly call you. I have been considering what a great misfortune it is for me not to have brothers and Sisters but I look upon you as one that I can talk to as a brother or a Sister … and when you die, I shall have none that are so well suited to my age to talk to … If ever you come to settle with me for some time how happy will my time be … I can then show my affection and love in a thousand ways, your death would therefore be to me a very severe blow of grief …

Mentioning her visit to the Hercules that had sailed her father to his death, she added:

> I went to see papa's ship and liked it very much but I

should have liked it better if my brother George had been there …

Ada, we see, was clearly extremely fond of little George, whom she called her brother. One senses a strong and poignant yearning within her to have siblings, and no doubt she would have enjoyed having more friends around of her own age too. At heart, she was very often in her life rather lonely.

5

The Art of Flying

In her early years of bringing Ada up, Lady Byron received financial help from her family. But in 1825, a great financial year for Lady Byron, she got the abundant sums of money she needed to live as she wanted to live and to bring Ada up in the style she wished to raise her daughter.

By 1825, Lady Byron's mother had died and she had inherited money from her. Lord Wentworth had passed away in 1815 and finally the funds had become available, a decade later. Combined with her inheritance from her mother, she was now a very wealthy woman. Her days of poverty with Byron were over. He had taken his debts with him to his grave. She now owned estates in Leicestershire that provided a substantial income.

Lady Byron now also owned coal mines in the north of England and lived in luxury with Ada on the proceeds of the coal mined from them and from her rents. Meanwhile, of course, the coal miners lived from hand to mouth in damp, cold cottages. Lady Byron, though, often sponsored schemes to help educate her miners' and tenants' children.

For Lady Byron, educating Ada was a great adventure. The little girl was famous throughout the nation because of her father, and Lady Byron was aware that her education of Ada would itself soon come under the spotlight.

As Ada passed from girlhood to womanhood, Lady Byron's educational energy, far from flagging, increased.

The usual educational opportunities open to girls in the early nineteenth century varied from limited to non-existent.

Even middle-class and aristocratic girls were usually only taught such skills as were necessary for overseeing the management of the households they could one day expect to oversee.

Many professional educators, even female ones, actually believed women's minds to be inferior to men's at a fundamental biological level. The fallacious reason often given at the time was that women's brains are on average smaller in physical mass than those of men.

Lady Byron's zeal as an educator stemmed from the unusually broad education she had herself received as the only daughter of wealthy, liberal, forward-thinking parents. She had studied history, poetry, literature, French, Italian, Latin, Greek, drawing and dancing. Lady Byron was now rich enough, and confident enough, to get what she wanted.

That, of course, did not mean that Ada would find an outlet for her mental energies after her education was completed any more than Lady Byron had done herself.

Even for a girl of Ada's socially elevated class who yearned to lead a mentally fulfilling life, the opportunities for career advancement and for having a life of the mind were almost non-existent. There was generally little alternative but to marry, produce children and live for one's husband. The idea of Ada doing anything other than marry would not have entered her mother's mind. But first, Lady Byron was determined that Ada's mind would be well-stocked with facts, so she'd be less likely to succumb to what she believed were the Byron family vices: excessive imagination and lack of discipline. Lady Byron did not, however, have any intention of encouraging Ada to be a professional woman of science or of mathematics. Instead Ada's mother, to whom Ada was in thrall for much of her life, was conscious of how disastrous her own marriage had been. She was determined that Ada would marry an aristocrat who could offer Ada a secure, comfortable domestic life. Ideally, Lady Byron wanted Ada to marry into the *older* aristocracy as there was a particular appeal at the time for titles that were more than a century old – indeed, such as the Byron baronetcy.

Lady Byron, now rich, influential and strong-willed, was used to having her wishes obeyed. Ada's yearning to lead a life of the mind, readily expressed even in the letters she wrote as a teenage girl, was thus doomed from the start. She was destined to spend much of her life aching to use her mind, but was confronted with the day-to-day reality of children, nannies, servants, running a household and dealing with a husband's whims.

Some middle-class women, such as Jane Austen, the Brontës or – later in the century – Mary Anne Evans (as George Eliot), won careers for themselves through successful authorship. The reality of their struggle was likely to be a key subject of their books; Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), for example, is largely autobiographical in its account of the predicament of an intellectually gifted young woman forced to confront the rigid limitations of life as a governess.

It was also true that, occasionally, enormous talent along with a stroke of good fortune might give a woman an opportunity to escape the bonds of domesticity. Another middle-class woman, Mary Somerville – later a close friend of Lady Byron and Ada – was to achieve international renown as a mathematician and scientist and was to have the first Oxford College for women named after her in 1879. Mary had first become interested in mathematics when she amused herself by solving the often challenging mathematical puzzles that were frequently published in Victorian embroidery magazines.

In June 1826, ten-year-old Ada embarked with her mother and her governess, Miss Stamp, for the Continent. They travelled with a range of friends and one of Lady Byron's cousins, Robert Noel.

Annabella hadn't dared take Ada abroad while Lord Byron was still alive. Byron had been desperate to see Ada, and Annabella feared he might hear of his daughter's arrival on the Continent and try to have her kidnapped. In style, they made a fifteen-month Grand Tour of the Continent.

Ada loved the sensory explosion that touring brought to her quiet life. On one occasion she wrote to the Scottish poet

and dramatist Joanna Baillie, a friend of Lady Byron and Ada, how beautiful she thought the Alps were, and how she could see them from every street in Turin. At the time, Turin was the capital of the kingdom of Sardinia, and a prosperous city of more than 150,000 inhabitants, splendidly sited on the rapid-flowing Po River with great views of the Alps. The city reappears in our story in due course because, as chance would have it, it was there that a mathematician called Charles Babbage found a more interested and committed audience than he was readily able to find in Britain.

Ada enjoyed sketching as well as writing, and she drew some chalk sketches of the Alpine scenery in Switzerland. She also wrote about being impressed by the steam boats she saw on Lake Lucerne, and how she enjoyed the organ music she had heard in the churches. At one point she even speculated that she might make a career as a singer. Ada was given to developing passions. When learning the violin as a child, she did so while walking around the billiard table as she was so absorbed in her studies that it was feared that she would otherwise not get enough healthy exercise.

In the autumn of 1827, Lady Byron and eleven-year-old Ada headed back with Ada's governess, Miss Stamp, from their fifteen-month Grand Tour of Continental Europe.

After their return to England, Lady Byron rented Bifrons, the imposing country house at Patrixbourne, Kent, that was a day's coach-drive from London and far enough to be secluded, and moved there with her daughter. Life resumed its usual pattern and for much of the early part of 1828, Lady Byron was away visiting friends or at various 'rest cures,' leaving Ada alone with her governess, her various tutors, and her beloved cat, Puff, one of whose kittens she promised to her 'brother' George, the heir of the new Lord Byron.

With her mother often away, Ada now relied somewhat on Puff for emotional support. She wrote a letter in French about her cat, dated December 10, 1827 (her twelfth birthday), and sent it from Bifrons to a lady called Flore,

presumably her French tutor.

> This morning Madame Puff gave me a pretty gift of a purse, which she presented to me in the most gracious manner between her two fore-paws, the truth is that Miss Stamp had the kindness to make the purse, and then made Madame Puff give it to me, and it is quite a curious thing enough that while Miss Stamp was making this purse, Puff jumped onto her lap every so often and watched the work or pushed her nose against the silk as if she were taking an interest in it.
>
> Goodbye,
> Your affectionate
> AAB

With little else providing interest at Bifrons, what happens in Puff's life makes a frequent appearance, too, in Ada's letters to her absent mother. As Ada wrote:

> Your grand-daughter [*Puff*] has taken up all her kittens into a very nasty dirty hole in the roof of the house where nobody can get at them, she stays with them all day long & only comes down for her meals. I suppose their bed is made of cobwebs, and I think that Puff cannot have a very refined taste.

And on January 8, 1828, Ada wrote:

> My dear Mammy … Puff is a naughty cat and has got a little hiding place in the chimney of my room where she puts the birds she catches and there she leaves them till she is hungry and wishes to eat one, this morning she took one of them under my bed and gave me the satisfaction of hearing her crunch each bone as she eats the bird.

In the same letter about her cat crunching a bird's bones, she hit on the daydream of flying, writing as follows:

I wish that supposing I fly well by the time you come back you would, if you are satisfied with my performance, present me with a crown of laurels, but it must only be on condition that I *fly* tolerably well. Pray do not ask me whether I get on well or ill with my flying because as I mentioned before you went I do not wish you to know anything about it till you come home and even then I shall only let you know by my actions …

Your affectionate young Turkey …

Ada grew more and more interested in – or indeed obsessed with – the idea of flying. No longer were hers just idle daydreams of a teenager. Ada's had an unmistakable structure and purpose to them: she wasn't only preoccupied with the idea of flying, she passionately wanted to build a flying machine. She was fascinated by the practical challenges of the task and thought out its practicalities during her solitary time, writing to her mother, still her only confidant, on Wednesday, April 2, 1828:

> Since last night I have been thinking more about the flying, & I can find no difficulty in the motion or distension of the wings, I have already thought of a way of fixing them on to the shoulders and I think that they might perhaps be made of oil silk and if that does not answer I must try what I can do with feathers.
>
> I know you will laugh at what I am going to say but I am going to take the exact patterns of a bird's wing in proportion to the size of its body and then I am immediately going to set about making a pair of paper wings of exactly the same size as the bird's in proportion to my size …
>
> I ought not to forget to tell you that in my new flying plan, if it answers, I shall be able to guide myself in the air by a method I have lately thought of. I have now a great favour to ask of you which is to try and procure me some book which will make me thoroughly understand the anatomy of a bird, and if you can get

> one with plates to illustrate the descriptions I should be very glad because I have no inclination whatever to dissect even a bird. I do not think that without plates, I could be made thoroughly to understand the anatomy of a bird …

Five days later Ada wrote another letter, again to her mother, about her plans. By now Ada's speculations had progressed to the dream of powered flight.

> As soon as I have got flying to perfection, I have got a scheme about a … steamengine which, if ever I effect it, will be more wonderful than either steampackets or steamcarriages. It is to make a thing in the form of a horse with a steamengine in the inside so contrived as to move an immense pair of wings, fixed on the outside of the horse, in such a manner as to carry it up into the air while a person sits on its back. This last scheme probably has infinitely more difficulties and obstacles in its way than my scheme for flying, but still I should think that it is possible …

The day after writing this letter, Ada wrote to Lady Byron again, though now she had evidently been chastened by a letter from her mother indicating Lady Byron's disapproval of the thinking-time she was giving to her pioneering of aviation. As Ada wrote:

> My dearest Mammy. I received your letter this morning & really do not think that I often think of the wings when I ought to think of other things, but it was very kind of you to make the remark to me …
>
> I have now decided upon making much smaller wings than I before intended, and they will be perfectly well proportioned in every respect, exactly on the same plan and of the same shape as a bird's. Though they will not be nearly enough to try and fly with, yet they will be quite enough so, to enable one to explain perfectly to any one my project for flying, and will serve as a model

for my future real wings.

It wasn't the first time Ada and Lady Byron would disagree over the nature and direction of Ada's interests, and it wouldn't be the last. Ada's fascination with flying continued and on Wednesday, April 9, 1828, she wrote to her mother that she (Ada) had had

> … great pleasure today in looking at the wing of a dead crow and I still think that I shall manage to fly and I have thought of three different ways of flying that all strike me as likely to answer.

It was not much later that Lady Byron hired a tutor at £300 a year to teach Ada mathematics. This equates to around £30,000 today and was a substantial salary. Clearly Lady Byron thought her daughter merited such an expensive education and she wrote to the tutor with careful instructions:

> There are no weeds in her mind; it has to be planted. Her greatest defect is want of order, which mathematics will remedy. She has taught herself part of Paisley's Geometry [*presumably Batty Langley's Practical Geometry 1726, dedicated to Lord Paisley*], which she liked particularly.

Strangely, and perhaps paradoxically, Lady and Lord Byron were in complete agreement who their grown-up daughter should be. When Byron had asked for a description of his daughter's character from Lady Byron through Augusta, just before his death, he had said:

> I hope the Gods have made her anything save poetical – it is enough to have one such fool in the family.

6

Love

When in 1837 Benjamin Disraeli, a novelist before he became one of Britain's most famous politicians, based the heroine of one of his novels closely on Ada, such was Ada's celebrity due to the fame of her father's separation from her mother that he could take it for granted readers would recognise his portrait of her. Disraeli named the Ada character 'Venetia' – the eponymous name of the novel – and the Lady Byron character 'Annabel,' with only a slight change of spelling of the original.

Having begun his novel in traditional nineteenth-century style, with a lengthy description of the ancient, ivy-draped country house, Cherbury, in which the drama, such as it is, takes place, Disraeli continues:

> This picturesque and secluded abode was the residence of Lady Annabel Herbert and her daughter, the young and beautiful Venetia, a child, at the time when our history commences, of very tender age. It was nearly seven years since Lady Annabel and her infant daughter had sought the retired shades of Cherbury, which they had never since quitted. They lived alone and for each other, the mother educated her child, and the child interested her mother by her affectionate disposition, the development of a mind of no ordinary promise, and a sort of captivating grace and charming playfulness of temper, which were extremely delightful.

As far as is known, Disraeli never met either Ada or Lady Byron. Nonetheless, Disraeli's romantic take no doubt reflected the views of the chattering classes of the time, who'd all read Byron's lampoon of his wife. As Disraeli wrote:

> Lady Annabel rose from her seat, and walked up and down the room, speaking with an excitement very unusual with her.
>
> 'To have all the soft secrets of your life revealed to the coarse wonder of the gloating multitude; to find yourself the object of the world's curiosity, still worse, their pity, their sympathy; to have the sacred conduct of your hearth canvassed in every circle, and be the grand subject of the pros and cons of every paltry journal, ah, Venetia! you know not, you cannot understand, and it is impossible you can comprehend, the bitterness of such a lot.'

If that wasn't purple enough, Disraeli continued with gusto his baroque account of a wronged woman pining for death to release her from her heartache.

> 'I have schooled my mind,' continued Lady Annabel, still pacing the room with agitated steps; 'I have disciplined my emotions; I have felt at my heart the constant, the undying pang, and yet I have smiled, that you might be happy. But I can struggle against my fate no longer. No longer can I suffer my unparalleled, yes, my unjust doom. What have I done to merit these afflictions? Now, then, let me struggle no more; let me die!'

Lady Byron, though, had no intention of dying. There was far more sport in enjoying her money and rest cures. Nonetheless, Disraeli's novel does suggest that Lady Byron had a point when she picked remote places for Ada to reach maturity. Far removed from fashionable society and its gossip, there was no risk that anyone would cause Ada to be upset, or ask questions, by referring to the shadows of the

past.

On December 10, 1828, Ada turned thirteen. Now she entered a new phase of her life. Her governess Miss Stamp, whom Ada liked so much, was leaving the employ of Lady Byron at the end of the year. Instead of hiring another governess, Lady Byron decided, for the time being at least, to make use of several of her friends to develop Ada's mind, enhance her studies and exercise a good moral influence over Ada.

Then, early in 1829, Ada became very ill. No one knows what was wrong with her, and some biographers have suggested measles, but measles do not normally cause paralysis, which Ada suffered. A more likely candidate is polio. However, the truth will now probably not be known.

She was bedridden until the middle of 1832. The illness had a profound effect on Ada and she lost her dreamlike insouciance and gained focus. She continued her studies with great ardour for the three years when she was bedridden. Lady Byron took care to ensure that Ada did not try to do more than her health permitted, but she now worked hard and was frequently very tough on herself and her educational failings, even though Ada precociously mastered German on her own.

If ever Ada came close to being Lady Byron's aristocratic mini-me, it was now. Ada reports on occasion that she has gone for a few turns in her wheelchair, and the tone she adopts towards her studies and herself is often indeed serious and even self-chastening. On occasion she is even not averse to making sneaky comments about her mother.

To her cousin Robert Noel, who had joined their Grand Tour, Ada wrote in flawless German the following note. The translation reads:

27 August 1830

I thank you for your letter, and especially for your