



From virtuous victim to self-sufficient heroine: Lady Byron

Biography

Lady Byron and Her Daughters

Julia Markus

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WRITERS DON'T always make the best husbands. Tales tell of the cold-hearted Thomas Hardy, the dastardly Charles Dickens and the philandering Ian Fleming. Yet few husbands were as dreadful as the dashing Lord Byron, as revealed by Julia Markus in her biography of Annabella Milbanke, Lady Byron.

The biography coincides with the bicentenary of the birth of Lady Byron's daughter, the computer-science pioneer Ada Lovelace. Lady Byron herself was no mean mathematician, dubbed by Byron his 'princess of parallelograms', and the book is an homage to the women in his circle.

'Regency high society had only one rule,' Miss Markus informs us: 'Do whatever you wish—discreetly.' Lord Byron had little time for such subtleties and his relationship with Lady Byron provided the public with regular scandals. The first half of the book relates the horrific events of Lady Byron's early marriage and her difficulties in obtaining a divorce. The second sees Lady Byron come into her own

as a single mother and philanthropist, campaigning for the education of women and the working poor.

Lady Byron's transformation is attended by an extraordinary cast of supporting characters, such as the scheming Lady Melbourne, the mentally unstable Caroline Lamb and the dapper Charles Babbage, who dreamed of a steam-powered computer. Most fascinating of all is Lady Byron's fraught relationship with Byron's lover and half-sister Augusta Leigh, her nemesis and yet, in some senses, her closest confidante. One of the strangest twists is Annabella's decision to adopt Leigh's illegitimate daughter, Medora.

Miss Markus has a tendency to emphasise Byron's effeminacy (he weeps, he faints), but he remains the hero of the tale. Whereas Lady Byron is stalwart and strategic, Byron is vibrant in his 'brilliant poetic spite'—we can't help but feel a tinge of regret when he dies, leaving us in Lady Byron's capable hands. The book presents a firm case against history's 'overwhelming devotion to male genius' and gives Lady Byron the attention she deserves. Yet, why is it that the Devil always has the best lines? *Matilda Bathurst*