

BYRON'S POEMS TO AND ABOUT HIS WIFE



Jessie Chambers' opinion of how D.H.Lawrence, in writing of their relationship in *Sons and Lovers*, misrepresented and betrayed it, is well-known.



It helps to see things from Lady Byron's viewpoint if we imagine some of Jessie Chambers' thoughts being uttered by her, reading Byron's poetry about the break-up of their marriage at the start of 1816:

In spite of myself I heard the old forced note, the need to convince himself. But I felt how sincere was his desire to be convinced.¹

According to my old custom I did not contradict him but let him talk himself out. I never took his assertions about people and things seriously. They were not necessarily true, but they showed the inclinations of his mood.²

1: 'ET' Jessie Chambers, *D.H.Lawrence, A Personal Record* (Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1965), p.180.

2: *Ibid*, p.195.

Lawrence was expecting me to attack him. He knew I must be hurt, and thought I should be furiously angry. What he did not understand was that the hurt went deeper than any anger. It went down to the roots of my feeling for him and altered my conception of his nature.³

Annabella, Lady Byron, has had and still has several supporters,⁴ but none has pinpointed exactly the way in which Byron, like his fellow Nottinghamshire writer Lawrence a century later, turned the failure of his relationship with her on its head when writing about it for posterity, and imputed all his own failings to her. And Byron didn't have the excuse of a beloved but dominating mother, recently dead. His relationship with his own mother had been strained and peculiar, but she had never acted as a brake on his relationships with women, as Mrs Lawrence had on her son.

Byron and Annabella Milbanke were married on January 2nd 1815, at her parents' house at Seaham on the coast of County Durham, after a wooing which had taken place largely through the post, and which he would not have pursued had it not been for pressure on him from Lady Melbourne and his half-sister Augusta Leigh. He was desperate for some means of getting out of debt and out of his entanglement with Augusta: Annabella thought she could reform him (though she had at first no suspicions about him and Augusta).

The marriage started to go wrong immediately after the wedding. As they prepared to depart from her parents' house, Byron asked, forgetting who she now was, "Miss Milbanke, are you ready?" The bells of Durham rang for them as they passed through – "Ringing for our happiness, I suppose," snarled the groom. Later that day he said, "It *must* come to a separation! You should have married me when I first proposed". Later still, "I wonder how much longer I shall be able to keep up the part I have been playing!"

Europe still being a war zone, they honeymooned at Halnaby in Yorkshire (Byron called it a "treaclemoon").⁵ Soon Halnaby was itself a war zone. On the wedding night, Byron awoke, saw a candle burning on the other side of the scarlet bed-curtains, and exclaimed, "Good God! I am fairly in Hades, with Proserpina by my side!" The makes him into Pluto or Dis, King of the Underworld, and his innocent bride into the girl trapped there with him, as her mother looks about for her in vain up in the world.

Back at Seaham, they played a brief game of *bout-rimés*, where one player writes a line and the other then rhymes with it. She later recorded,

At Seaham I do not remember having felt any strong suspicions respecting A—— except once. It was after we had been making *bout-rimés* together in the drawing room with that sort of mirth which seeks to jest away bitter truths. The accidental coincidences were very singular & he desired me to send the verses to A——. I said I would distinguish his lines & mine by crosses. He turned pale – and entreated me not, for I should "frighten her to death." I had before casually remarked these crosses in their letters, and in one of his to her when he was at Seaham first, which he took out to read me one passage ... He then

3: Ibid, p.211.

4: See especially Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Lady Byron Vindicated, A History of the Byron Controversy from its Beginning in 1816 to the Present Time*, 1870; Milbanke, Ralph (Viscount Wentworth, later Earl of Lovelace), *Astarte: a Fragment of Truth Concerning ... Lord Byron*. 1905 (privately printed); ed. Mary Caroline, Countess of Lovelace, 1921 (with additional letters); Ethel Coburn Mayne, *The Life and Letters of Anne Isabella, Lady Noel Byron*, 1929; and Joan Pierson, *The Real Lady Byron* 1992.

5: BLJ IV 263; letter to Moore, February 2 1815.

told me he never wrote anything to A—— about *love*. I did not much consider the reason.⁶

Crosses were symbols, in his correspondence with Augusta, of physical affection.

Rhyming Games

Byron: My wife's a vixen spoilt by her Mamma
Lady Byron: Oh how I pity poor hen-peck'd Papa.
Lady Byron: The lord defend us from a honey moon
Byron: Our cares commence our comforts end so soon.

Byron: This morn's the first of many a happy year –
Lady Byron: I could not live so long with you, my dear
Byron: O ever in my heart the last and first –
Lady Byron: And without doubt – it is the very worst.

Lady Byron: Perplexed in the extreme to find a line⁷
Byron: A different destiny is yours and mine.⁸

Byron: If rhymes be omens what a fate is ours –
Lady Byron: And bread and butter eagerly devours.

Lady Byron: My husband is the greatest goose alive
Byron: I feel that I have been a fool to wive.

Lady Byron: This weather makes our noses blue⁹
Byron: Bell – that but rhymes an epithet for you.

They were trapped with one another – completely incompatible except in bed. He was used to playing games to entertain, mislead and bewilder people, and at first she took all his imaginative ideas with mathematical literalness.¹⁰ When she learned to make jokes in turn, he was bewildered, and hated it.

After a year of misery during which his behaviour became more violent and erratic, Byron threw Annabella out of the house. He threw her out of the house in such a way as to make it look as if the idea had been hers – and spent the rest of his life lamenting her incomprehensible decision to leave him. This is the letter by means of which he forced her out (although she was in fear of her life, she had given no indication that she was “disposed to leave London”):

January 6.th 1816.

When you are disposed to leave London it would be convenient that a day should be fixed – and (if possible) not a very remote one for that purpose. – Of my opinion upon that subject you are sufficiently in possession. – & of the circumstances which have led to it – as also – to my plans – or rather – intentions – for the future – – – When in the country I will write to you more fully – as Lady Noel has asked you to Kirkby – there you can be for the present – unless you prefer Seaham –

⁶: Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife* (Macdonald 1962), pp.275-6.

⁷: *Perplexed in the extreme – Othello*, V ii 349.

⁸: B. means that he'll never be at a loss for a rhyme.

⁹: The line has insufficient feet. Annabella has lost interest.

¹⁰: See Cochran, *The Draught Fermenting on the Chimney-Piece*, *Byron Journal* 2004:2, pp.125-30.

More than this, I scarce can die.

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With this he published *A Sketch from Private Life*, in theory about Annabella's companion Mrs Clermont, a person, his poem apart, not noted for having done or said anything remarkable at all. *A Sketch* includes these lines:

Skill'd by a touch to deepen scandal's tints 55
 With all the kind mendacity of hints¹⁹
 While mingling truth with falsehood – sneers with smiles –
 A thread of candour with a web of wiles;
 A plain blunt show of briefly-spoken seeming,
 To hide her bloodless heart's soul-hardened scheming; 60
 A lip of lies – a face formed to conceal;
 And, without feeling, mock at all who feel:²⁰
 With a vile mask the Gorgon²¹ would disown;
 A cheek of parchment – and an eye of stone.²²

Hypocrisy, lies and scheming had been on Byron's mind since he had written the *Curse* which was to climax the first scene of *Manfred*:

By thy cold breast and serpent smile,
 By thy unfathomed gulfs of guile,
 By that most seeming virtuous eye, 245
 By thy shut soul's hypocrisy,
 By the perfection of thine art
 Which passed for human thine own heart,
 By thy delight in others' pain,
 And by thy brotherhood of Cain,
 I call upon thee! and compel 250
 Thyself to be thy proper Hell!

Annabella said nothing in public, a fact which, contrasting as it did with his own loquacity in self-exculpation, Byron resented. He was deeply into denial about the reasons for the separation, and remained so for the rest of his life. Like Jessie Chambers listening to D.H.Lawrence, Annabella might have said, "According to my old custom I did not contradict him but let him talk himself out."

A separation was signed on April 21st 1816, and on April 23rd Byron left England. In September of that year he heard she was ill, and wrote (but did not publish), the following:

Lines on hearing that Lady Byron was ill

And thou wert sad – yet I was not with thee;
 And thou wert sick, and yet I was not near;
 Methought that Joy and Health alone could be
 Where I was *not* – and pain and sorrow here!
 And is it thus? – it is as I foretold, 5

¹⁹: Echoes Pope, *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 204: *Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike ...*

²⁰: Echoes Pope, *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 202: *And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer ...*

²¹: The foremost Gorgon was Medusa, whose glance turned people to stone.

²²: Compare the address to Castlereagh at *Don Juan*, Dedication, 16 1: *Cold-blooded, smooth-faced, placid Miscreant!*

And shall be more so; for the mind recoils
 Upon itself, and the wreck'd heart lies cold,
 While Heaviness collects the shattered spoils.
 It is not in the storm nor in the strife
 We feel benumbed, and wish to be no more, 10
 But in the after-silence on the shore.
 When all is lost, except a little life.

I am too well avenged! – but 'twas my right;
 Whate'er my sins might be, *thou* wert not sent 15
 To be the Nemesis who should requite –
 Nor did Heaven choose so near an instrument.
 Mercy is for the merciful! – if thou
 Hast been of such, 'twill be accorded now.
 Thy nights are banished from the realms of sleep! –
 Yes! they may flatter thee, but thou shalt feel 20
 A hollow agony which will not heal,
 For thou art pillowed on a curse too deep;
 Thou hast sown in my sorrow, and must reap
 The bitter harvest in a woe as real!
 I have had many foes, but none like thee; 25
 For 'gainst the rest myself I could defend,
 And be avenged, or turn them into friend;
 But thou in safe implacability
 Hadst nought to dread – in thy own weakness shielded,
 And in my love, which hath but too much yielded, 30
 And spared, for thy sake, some I should not spare;
 And thus, upon the World's trust in thy truth,
 And the wild fame of my ungoverned youth –
 On things that were not, and on things that are –
 Even upon such a basis hast thou built 35
 A monument, whose cement hath been guilt!
 The moral Clytemnestra of thy lord,²³
 And hewed down, with an unsuspected sword,
 Fame, peace, and hope – and all the better life,
 Which, but for this cold treason of thy heart, 40
 Might still have risen from out the grave of strife,
 And found a nobler duty than to part.
 But of thy virtues didst thou make a vice,
 Trafficking with them in a purpose cold,
 For present anger, and for future gold – 45
 And buying others' grief at any price.
 And thus once entered into crooked ways,
 The earthly truth, which was thy proper praise,
 Did not still walk beside thee – but at times,
 And with a breast unknowing its own crimes, 50
 Deceit, averments incompatible,
 Equivocations, and the thoughts which dwell
 In Janus-spirits – the significant eye
 Which learns to lie with silence²⁴ – the pretext

23: Clytemnestra (assisted by her lover), murdered her husband Agamemnon in the bath. B. uses the term in letters at BLJ V 144, 186, 191, and 198; and X 142.

24: Combines what the witches do to Macbeth and what Pope says Addison does at the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 197-214

Of prudence, with advantages annexed – 55
 The acquiescence in all things which tend,
 No matter how, to the desired end –
 All found a place in thy philosophy.
 The means were worthy, and the end is won
 I would not do by thee as thou hast done! – September 1816.

from *Don Juan* Canto I (written 1818)

Despite Byron's disclaimers ("tell me if you think there could or could not have been any intention of depicting that woman" – BLJ VII 239) no-one believes that Don Juan's mother, Donna Inez, is not based on "the bitch my wife" (BLJ VI 95). However, *Don Juan* is not just thinly-disguised autobiography. As Juan's mother and educator, Inez bears responsibility for his initial ignorance about the facts of life, and thus for the escapade which sets him off on his travels. That the hero's fall should be occasioned by his own mother, and that she should be one considered morally perfect, is all part of the irony. That she is also a version of the poet's wife, and an embodiment of the English tendency to cant, merely adds to the complexity of the effect.

Here is Annabella's private reaction to *Don Juan* I and II. It is interesting to compare it with Jessie Chambers' reaction to *Sons and Lovers*, quoted above.

I have read those parts of *Don Juan* which contain personal allusions, and the impression was not so disagreeable as I expected. In the first place, I am very much relieved to find that there is not any thing which I can be expected to notice, and I am thankful that none for whom I am interested can be pained or injured. As for myself, I do not think that my sins are in the pharasaical or pedantic line, and I am very sure that he does not think they are, but avails himself of the prejudices which some may entertain against me, to give a plausible colouring to his accusations. I must however confess that the quizzing in one or two passages was so good as to make me smile at myself – therefore others are heartily welcome to laugh. What may have been omitted *à mon sujet* I know not – certainly more annoying things might have been said – though the malice of intention is sufficiently evident. I do not feel inclined to continue the perusal. It is always a task to me now to read his works, in which, through all the levity, I discern enough to awaken very painful feelings.²⁵

10.

His Mother was a learned Lady, famed
 For every branch of Science known –
 In every Christian language ever named, 75
 With Virtues equalled by her wit alone,
 She made the cleverest people quite ashamed,
 And even the Good with inward Envy groan,
 Finding themselves so very much exceeded
 In their own way by all the things that She did. – – – 80

11.

Her Memory was a Mine: She knew by heart
 All Calderon and greater part of Lopé,²⁶
 So that if any Actor missed his part

²⁵: Lady Byron to Theresa Villiers, July 15th 1819, quoted Ethel Coburn Mayne, *The Life and Letters of Anna Isabella Lady Noel Byron* (New York, Scribner 1929), p.283.

²⁶: Calderon de la Barca (1600-81), and Lopé de Vega (1562-1625), are the two greatest Spanish dramatists, although Tirso de Molina – author of the first Don Juan play – is another important star in their galaxy. As Lopé and Calderon between them wrote over 2,200 plays, Donna Inez's memory was considerable.

She could have served him for the Prompter's copy;
 For her Feinagle's were an useless art,²⁷ 85
 And he himself obliged to shut up shop – he
 Could never make a memory so fine as
 That which adorned the brain of Donna Inez.

12.

Her favourite Science was the mathematical,²⁸
 Her noblest Virtue was her Magnanimity, 90
 Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was Attic all,²⁹
 Her serious Sayings darkened to Sublimity;
 In short, in all things She was fairly what I call
 A Prodigy – her Morning dress was Dimity,³⁰
 Her Evening Silk, or, in Summer, Muslin, 95
 And other Stuffs, with Which I won't stay puzzling.

13.

She knew the Latin – that is, “the Lord's prayer,”
 And Greek – the Alphabet – I'm nearly sure;
 She read some French romances here and there,
 Although her mode of speaking was not pure; 100
 For native Spanish she had no great care,
 At least her Conversation was obscure;
 Her thoughts were theorems, her words a problem,
 As if She deemed that Mystery would ennoble 'em.

14.

She liked the English and the Hebrew tongue, 105
 And said there was Analogy between 'em;
 She proved it somehow out of Sacred song,*
 But I must leave the proofs to those who've seen 'em,
 But this I heard her say, and can't be wrong,
 And all may think which way their Judgements lean 'em,110
 “'Tis strange – the Hebrew Noun which means 'I am,'³¹
 The English always use to govern d—n.”

27: *Feinagle*: Gregor von Feinagle (1765?-1819), a contemporary expert in the art of memory.

28: *mathematical*: Lady Byron was very good at mathematics, and their daughter, Augusta Ada, was to be an outstanding mathematician. When the engagement was in progress B. referred to his fiancée as the “Princess of Parallelograms” (BLJ IV 48). But then see *Beppo* (1817) 623–8:

*They stare not on the Stars from out their Attics,
 Nor deal (thank God for that!) in Mathematics.*

*Why I thank God for that is no great matter;
 I have my reasons, you no doubt suppose,
 And as perhaps they would not highly flatter,
 I'll keep them for my life (to come) in prose ...*

B. did not keep them for his Memoirs, which were burnt anyway: he put them, lightly disguised, into *Don Juan* Canto I.

29: *Attic*: pure classical Greek. The word implies elevation.

30: *Dimity*: cotton with raised decorations. Annabella was fond of the material. See below, XIV, 26, 8.

31: *Hebrew Noun which means "I am,"*: Yahweh. See God's words to Moses at *Exodus* III, 13-14. The joke refers to *I'm damned, Well I'll be damned, Goddam, Goddammit*, and so on. See below, Canto XI 1.90, where *God damn!* is described as the English *shibboleth*.

15.

Some women use their tongues – She looked a lecture,
 Each eye a Sermon, and her brow a homily,
 An all-in-all-sufficient self-director, 115
 Like the lamented late Sir Samuel Romilly,³²
 The law’s expounder, and the State’s Corrector,
 Whose Suicide was almost an Anomaly –
 One sad example more, that “All is Vanity”³³
 (The Jury brought their verdict in, “Insanity”). 120

16.

In short, She was a walking Calculation;³⁴
 Miss Edgeworth’s Novels stepping from their Covers,³⁵
 Or Mrs Trimmer’s books on Education,³⁶
 Or Cœleb’s Wife set out in search of Lovers,³⁷
 Morality’s prim Personification, 125
 In which not Envy’s self a flaw discovers;
 To others share let “female Errors fall”³⁸
 For She had not even One, – the worst of all. –

32: *Sir Samuel Romilly* (1757-1818) was a politician and lawyer whom B. disliked because he had, in error, reneged on a commitment to represent B. in the separation proceedings between himself and Lady B., representing Lady Byron instead. A liberal reformer and anti-slavery campaigner, Romilly committed suicide in 1818 on the death of his wife, and only the inquest verdict allowed him Christian burial; a fact here mocked. For B.’s rhetorically gleeful prose reaction, see letter to Murray, June 7 1819: “I have at least seen Romilly shivered – who was one of the assassins [of *Agamemnon* / *Byron*]. – – When that felon, or Lunatic – (take your choice – he must be one and might be both) was doing his worst to uproot my whole family tree, branch, and blossoms; when after taking my retainer he went over to them – when he was bringing desolation on my hearth – and destruction on my household Gods – did he think that in three years a natural event – a severe domestic – but an expected and common domestic Calamity would lay his Carcase in a Cross road or stamp his name in a Verdict of Lunacy? Did he (who in his drivelling sexagenary dotage had not the courage to survive his Nurse – for what else was a wife to him at this time of life?–) reflect or consider what my feelings must have been ...” and so on (BLJ VI 150).

33: “All is Vanity”: Ecclesiastes, I, 2. Title of one of the *Hebrew Melodies* that Annabella had copied.

34: *She was a walking Calculation*: (a) refers to mathematics (b) implies instinctive, non-stop hypocrisy.

35: *Miss Edgeworth*: Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) was a popular educationalist and novelist of the day, authoress of *Castle Rackrent*.

36: *Mrs. Trimmer*: Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810) wrote conservative educational pamphlets.

37: *Cœleb’s Wife*: a novel by Hannah More (1745-1833). All three writers aimed at moral improvement, and would have earned Inez’s approval, a fact which should give us pause. See below, IV 915n.

38: “*female Errors fall*”: from the description of Belinda in Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, II 15-18:

*Yet graceful Ease, and Sweetness void of Pride,
 Might hide her Faults, if Belles had Faults to hide:
 If to her share some Female Errors fall,
 Look in her face, and you’ll forget ‘em all.*

Bell was one of Annabella’s nicknames. Compare *Beppo*, 612: *Unknown as bells within a Turkish steeple.*

17.

Oh! She was perfect beyond all parallel,
 Of every modern female Saint's comparison, 130
 So far beyond the cunning powers of hell,³⁹
 Her Guardian Angel had given up his Garrison,⁴⁰
 Even her minutest motions went as well
 As those of the best Time-piece made by Harrison;⁴¹
 In Virtues nothing earthly could surpass her – 135
 Save thine "incomparable Oil", Macassar!⁴²

18.

Perfect she was, but as Perfection is
 Insipid in this naughty World of ours,
 Where our first Parents never learned to kiss
 Till they were exiled from their earlier bowers,⁴³ 140
 Where all was Peace, and Innocence and Bliss
 (I wonder how they got through the twelve hours)
 Don José, like a lineal Son of Eve,⁴⁴
 Went plucking various fruit without her leave.

19.

He was a Mortal of the careless kind, 145
 With no great love for Learning, or the Learned,
 Who chose to go where'er he had a mind,
 And never dreamed his Lady was concerned;
 The World, as usual, wickedly inclined
 To see a Kingdom or a house o'erturned,⁴⁵ 150
 Whispered he had a Mistress; Some said *two*,
 But for domestic quarrels *one* will do.

39: *So far beyond the cunning powers of hell:* carries on the satire from 111-12 above. Inez / Annabella has no intuitive understanding of things either brute English, or diabolical.

40: *Her Guardian Angel had given up his Garrison:* though B. seems not to have known Blake, compare Blake's *The Angel*.

41: *Harrison:* John Harrison (1693-1776) was a famous chronologist, who invented a device, long sought after, which could determine a ship's longitude.

42: B.'s note: "Description des Vertus incomparables de l'Huile de Macassar." See the Advertisement. B. himself used Rowland's Macassar hair oil: "pray bring me some 'Macassar' or 'Russia Oil', as I begin to get venerable" (BLJ VI 138). Anti-Macassars were in the nineteenth century covers put over sofa- and chair-covers, and designed to keep hair-oil from furniture fabric.

43: B. has got it wrong here – it was in part as a consequence of learning to kiss lustfully that Adam and Eve were exiled – see *Paradise Lost* X 994-1066. B.'s Eden is always as much Miltonic as Biblical.

44: *our first Parents ... lineal Son of Eve:* the references to *Genesis* here are only partly comic. See below at I 1011 and II 1512. José, like Alfonso and Lambro after him and Adam and B. before him, is doomed to ruin his own Eden. B. distributes the blame in complex ways which shames the misogynist *Genesis*, however. José is the guilty party first, Inez merely suspected of intrigue, and provoking by her faultlessness; Julia is indubitably guilty; and Lambro is only claiming his own – even though in doing so he destroys it.

45: *The World, as usual, wickedly inclined / To see a Kingdom or a house o'erturned:* an autobiographical reference to the public rumours which surrounded B.'s separation from Annabella.

20.

Now Donna Inez had, with all her merit,
 A great opinion of her own good qualities;
 Neglect, indeed, requires a Saint to bear it, 155
 And so indeed She was in her Moralities;
 But then She had a Devil of a Spirit,
 And sometimes mixed up fancies with realities,
 And let few opportunities escape
 Of getting her liege lord into a Scrape. 160

21.

This was an easy matter with a man
 Oft in the wrong, and never on his guard;⁴⁶
 And even the wisest, do the best they can,
 Have moments, hours, and days so unprepared,
 That you might "brain them with their Lady's fan,"⁴⁷ 165
 And sometimes Ladies hit exceeding hard,
 And Fans turn into falchions in fair hands,⁴⁸
 And why and wherefore No one understands. –⁴⁹

22.

'Tis pity learned Virgins ever wed
 With persons of no sort of education, 170
 Or Gentlemen who, though well-born and bred,
 Grow tired of Scientific conversation;
 I don't choose to say much upon this head;
 I'm a plain man, and in a single station,
 But – Oh! ye Lords of Ladies intellectual,⁵⁰ 175
 Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck'd you all?⁵¹

from a letter to Thomas Moore, January 2nd 1820⁵²

*To-day it is my wedding-day;
 And all the folks would stare
 If wife should dine at Edmonton,
 And I should dine at Ware.⁵³*

46: *Oft in the wrong, and never on his guard:* a Byronic self-description.

47: "brain them with their Lad's fan"; see *Henry IV I ii iii* 25-6. Hotspur is expressing contempt for the manhood of one who will not support his plot.

48: *falchions:* swords.

49: The joke at 165-8 echoes Pope, *Rape of the Lock*, V 39 *et. seq.*:

*All side in Parties, and begin th'Attack;
 Fans clap, Silks russle, and tough Whalebones crack;
 Heroes' and Heroines' Shouts confus'dly rise,
 And base, and treble Voices strike the Skies.
 No common Weapons in their Hands are found,
 Like Gods they fight, nor dread a mortal Wound.*

50: *Ladies intellectual:* B. affected disdain for intellectual women; see his comment on Mme de Staël, below, III 686n: also IV 871-96. However, it did not prevent him from having affairs with several, and of course marrying one.

51: *hen-peck'd:* a rare manuscript example of B. inserting an apostrophe into a past participle. He clearly intends a comic effect.

52: BLJ VII 16.

53: B. quotes Cowper, *John Gilpin*, st.49.

Or *thus*:

Here's a happy new year! but with reason
 I beg you'll permit me to say
 Wish me *many* returns of the *season*,
 But as *few* as you please of the *day*.

from a letter to Thomas Moore, November 5th 1820⁵⁴

A year ago, you swore, fond she!
 "To love, to honour," and so forth:
 Such was the vow you pledged to me,
 And here's exactly what 'tis worth.

from a letter to Thomas Moore, September 29th 1821⁵⁵

Moore writes of two enclosures with this letter, "The second enclosure in the note consisted of some verses, written by him, December 10th, 1820, on seeing the following paragraph in a newspaper. 'Lady Byron is this year the lady patroness at the annual Charity Ball given at the Town Hall at Hinckley, Leicestershire, and Sir G. Crewe, Bart. the principal steward.' These verses are full of strong and indignant feeling,—every stanza concluding pointedly with the words 'Charity Ball,'—and the thought that predominates through the whole may be collected from a few of the opening lines:—⁵⁶ [*Moore prints only stanzas 1 and 3*]

1.

WHAT matter the pangs of a husband and father,
 If his sorrows in exile be great or be small,
 So the Pharisee's glories around her she gather,
 And the saint patronizes her "Charity Ball!"

2.

What matters – a heart which, though faulty, was feeling, 5
 Be driven to excesses which once could appal –
 That the sinner should suffer is only fair dealing,
 As the saint keeps her charity back for "the ball"!

3.

What matters a heart which though faulty was feeling, 10
 Be driven to excesses which once could appal
 That the sinner should suffer is only fair dealing,
 For the witch keeps her charity back for the Ball.

4.

Then goes on the dance, and hear music upraising
 Those tones which the past to the cruel heart recalled –
 Oh yes, for the world is admiringly gazing 15
 On the witch patronising the Charity Ball.

⁵⁴: BLJ VII 219.

⁵⁵: BLJ VIII 228 & n (the poem is not printed).

⁵⁶: Moore's Life (1830), Vol.II p.540. Moore has "September 28th"; McGann (CPW IV 520) "1 March 1821".

5.

Go, faithless in feeling – and if not in person,
 Thank pride and thank coldness and dulness for all
 The deception which keeps us from keeping our curse on
 The witch patronising the Charity Ball. 20

6.

And when the [] o'er the heart thou hast trampled,
 Still keeps up the mask, for if once it should fall
 Then the [] would glare unexampled
 On the witch patronising her charity ball.

7.

What matters a harp which not idly has sounded 25
 Though Erin's and Scotie's ring high in the hall
 Has been jarred in its chords, and the minstrel hath wounded
 So the witch patronises her charity ball. – December 10th 1820

from *Sardanapalus*, IV i (written 1821)

Byron's tragedy *Sardanapalus* was begun on January 13th 1821, and finished on May 27th. Its protagonist is a version not only of George IV but of Byron; but Zarina, estranged Queen to Sardanapalus, is a not version of Queen Caroline, just of Annabella, Lady Byron. E.H.Coleridge writes, "Byron must often have pictured to himself an unexpected meeting with his wife. In certain moods he would write letters to her which were never sent, or never reached her hands. The scene between Sardanapalus and Zarina reflects the sentiments contained in one such letter, dated November 17th, 1821". This dignified and restrained letter (BLJ IX 64-6), was never sent. Instead, two years later, Byron showed it to Lady Blessington.

This is Zarina's only scene.

When Byron concedes his wife dignity and a voice of her own, the effect is about one-fiftieth as entertaining as when he satirises her.

Re-enter SALEMENES and ZARINA.

Salemenes:	My sister! Courage: Shame not our blood with trembling, but remember From whence we sprung. The Queen is present, Sire.
Zarina:	I pray thee, brother, leave me.
Salemenes:	Since you ask it.

Exit SALEMENES.

Zarina:	Alone with him! How many a year has passed, Though we are still so young, since we have met, Which I have worn in widowhood of heart. He loved me not: yet he seems little changed – Changed to me only – would the change were mutual! He speaks not – scarce regards me – not a word, Nor look – yet he was soft of voice and aspect, Indifferent, not austere. My Lord!	235 240
Sardanapalus:	Zarina!	
Zarina:	No, <i>not</i> Zarina – do not say Zarina. That tone – that word – annihilate long years, And things which make them longer.	
Sardanapalus:	'Tis too late	245

	To think of these past dreams. Let's not reproach – That is, reproach me not – for the last time – And first. I ne'er reproached you.	
Zarina:		
Sardanapalus:	'Tis most true; And that reproof comes keener on my heart Than – but our hearts are not in our own power.	250
Zarina:	Nor hands; but I gave both.	
Sardanapalus:	Your brother said It was your will to see me, ere you went From Nineveh with – (<i>He hesitates.</i>)	
Zarina:	Our children: it is true. I wish to thank you that you have not divided My heart from all that's left it now to love –	255
	Those who are yours and mine, who look like you, And look upon me as you looked upon me Once – but they have not changed.	
Sardanapalus:	Nor ever will. I fain would have them dutiful.	
Zarina:	I cherish Those infants, not alone from the blind love Of a fond mother, but as a fond woman. They're now the only tie between us.	260
Sardanapalus:	Deem not I have not done you justice: rather make them Resemble your own line than their own Sire. I trust them with you – to you: fit them for A throne, or, if that be denied – You have heard Of this night's tumults?	265
Zarina:	I had half forgotten, And could have welcomed any grief save yours, Which gave me to behold your face again.	
Sardanapalus:	The throne – I say it not in fear – but 'tis In peril: they perhaps may never mount it; But let them not for this lose sight of it. I will dare all things to bequeath it them; But if I fail, then they must win it back Bravely – and, won, wear wisely, not as I Have wasted down my royalty.	270 275
Zarina:	They ne'er Shall know from me of aught but what may honour Their father's memory.	
Sardanapalus:	Rather let them hear The truth from you than from a trampling world. If they be in adversity, they'll learn Too soon the scorn of crowds for crownless Princes. And find that all their father's sins are theirs. My boys! – I could have borne it were I childless.	280
Zarina:	Oh! do not say so – do not poison all My peace left, by unwishing that thou wert A father. If thou conquerest, they shall reign, And honour him who saved the realm for them, So little cared for as his own; and if –	285
Sardanapalus:	'Tis lost, all Earth will cry out, "Thank your father!" And they will swell the echo with a curse.	290
Zarina:	That they shall never do; but rather honour The name of him, who, dying like a king, In his last hours did more for his own memory Than many monarchs in a length of days, Which date the flight of time, but make no annals.	295
Sardanapalus:	Our annals draw perchance unto their close;	

	But at the least, whate'er the past, their end Shall be like their beginning – memorable.	
Zarina:	Yet, be not rash – be careful of your life, Live but for those who love.	
Sardanapalus:	And who are they?	300
	A slave, who loves from passion – I'll not say Ambition – she has seen thrones shake, and loves; A few friends who have revelled till we are As one, for they are nothing if I fall;	
	A brother I have injured – children whom I have neglected, and a spouse –	305
Zarina:	Who loves.	
Sardanapalus:	And pardons?	
Zarina:	I have never thought of this, And cannot pardon till I have condemned.	
Sardanapalus:	My wife!	
Zarina:	Now blessings on thee for that word! I never thought to hear it more – from thee.	310
Sardanapalus:	Oh! thou wilt hear it from my subjects. Yes – These slaves whom I have nurtured, pampered, fed, And swoln with peace, and gorged with plenty, till They reign themselves – all monarchs in their mansions – Now swarm forth in rebellion, and demand His death, who made their lives a jubilee; While the few upon whom I have no claim Are faithful! This is true, yet monstrous.	315
Zarina:	'Tis Perhaps too natural; for benefits Turn poison in bad minds.	
Sardanapalus:	And good ones make Good out of evil. Happier than the bee, Which hives not but from wholesome flowers.	320
Zarina:	Then reap The honey, nor inquire whence 'tis derived. Be satisfied – you are not all abandoned.	
Sardanapalus:	My life insures me that. How long, bethink you, Were not I yet a king, should I be mortal; That is, where mortals are, not where they must be?	325
Zarina:	I know not. But yet live for my – that is, Your children's sake!	
Sardanapalus:	My gentle, wronged Zarina! I am the very slave of Circumstance And Impulse – borne away with every breath! ⁵⁷ Misplaced upon the throne – misplaced in life. I know not what I could have been, but feel I am not what I should be – let it end.	330
	But take this with thee: if I was not formed To prize a love like thine, a mind like thine, Nor doat even on thy beauty – as I've doated On lesser charms, for no cause save that such Devotion was a duty, and I hated	335
	All that looked like a chain for me or others (This even Rebellion must avouch); yet hear These words, perhaps among my last – that none E'er valued more thy virtues, though he knew not To profit by them – as the miner lights Upon a vein of virgin ore, discovering That which avails him nothing: he hath found it,	340
		345

57: A Byronic self-description.

But 'tis not his – but some superior's, who
 Placed him to dig, but not divide the wealth
 Which sparkles at his feet; nor dare he lift
 Nor poise it, but must grovel on, upturning 350
 The sullen earth.

Zarina: Oh! if thou hast at length
 Discovered that my love is worth esteem,
 I ask no more – but let us hence together,
 And I – let me say we – shall yet be happy.
 Assyria is not all the earth – we'll find 355
 A world out of our own – and be more blessed
 Than I have ever been, or thou, with all
 An empire to indulge thee.

Enter SALEMENES.

Salemenes: I must part ye –
 The moments, which must not be lost, are passing.

Zarina: Inhuman brother! wilt thou thus weigh out 360
 Instants so brief and blest?

Salemenes: Blest!
 Zarina: He hath been
 So gentle with me, that I cannot think
 Of quitting.

Salemenes: So – this feminine farewell
 Ends as such partings end, in no departure.
 I thought as much, and yielded against all 365
 My better bodings. But it must not be.
 Zarina: Not be?

Salemenes: Remain, and perish –
 Zarina: With my husband –
 Salemenes: And children.
 Zarina: Alas!
 Salemenes: Hear me, sister, like
 My sister: – all's prepared to make your safety
 Certain, and of the boys too, our last hopes; 370
 'Tis not a single question of mere feeling,
 Though that were much – but 'tis a point of state:
 The rebels would do more to seize upon
 The offspring of their sovereign, and so crush –
 Zarina: Ah! do not name it.

Salemenes: Well, then, mark me: when 375
 They are safe beyond the Median's grasp, the rebels
 Have missed their chief aim – the extinction of
 The line of Nimrod. Though the present King
 Fall, his sons live – for victory and vengeance.
 Zarina: But could not I remain, alone?

Salemenes: What! Leave 380
 Your children, with two parents and yet orphans –
 In a strange land – so young, so distant?

Zarina: No –
 My heart will break.

Salemenes: Now you know all – decide.
 Sardanapalus: Zarina, he hath spoken well, and we
 Must yield awhile to this necessity. 385
 Remaining here, you may lose all; departing,
 You save the better part of what is left,
 To both of us, and to such loyal hearts
 As yet beat in these kingdoms.

Salemenes: The time presses.

- Sardanapalus: Go, then. If e'er we meet again, perhaps 390
 I may be worthier of you – and, if not,
 Remember that my faults, though not atoned for,
 Are ended. Yet, I dread thy nature will
 Grieve more above the blighted name and ashes
 Which once were mightiest in Assyria – than – 395
 But I grow womanish again, and must not;
 I must learn sternness now. My sins have all
 Been of the softer order – hide thy tears –
 I do not bid thee *not* to shed them – 'twere
 Easier to stop Euphrates at its source 400
 Than one tear of a true and tender heart –
 But let me not behold them; they unman me
 Here when I had remanned myself. My brother,
 Lead her away.
- Zarina: Oh, God! I never shall
 Behold him more!
- Salemenes (*striving to conduct her*): Nay, sister, I must be obeyed. 405
- Zarina: I must remain – away! you shall not hold me.
 What, shall he die alone? – *I live alone?*
- Salemenes: He shall not die alone; but lonely you
 Have lived for years.
- Zarina: That's false! I knew he lived,
 And lived upon his image – let me go! 410
- Salemenes (*conducting her off the stage*): Nay, then, I must use
 some fraternal force,
 Which you will pardon.
- Zarina: Never. Help me! Oh!
 Sardanapalus, wilt thou thus behold me
 Torn from thee?
- Salemenes: Nay – then all is lost again,
 If that this moment is not gained.
- Zarina: My brain turns – 415
 My eyes fail – where is he?
- She faints.*
- Sardanapalus (*advancing*): No – set her down;
 She's dead – and you have slain her.
- Salemenes: 'Tis the mere
 Faintness of o'erwrought passion: in the air
 She will recover. Pray, keep back. (*Aside*) I must
 Avail myself of this sole moment to 420
 Bear her to where her children are embarked,
 I' the royal galley on the river.
- SALEMENES *bears her off.*

from a letter to John Murray, February 26th 1821⁵⁸

The following epigram was attempted the week before Byron began *Sardanapalus*, on his sixth wedding anniversary.

Ode on the 2d January 1821

Upon this day I married & full sore
Repent that marriage but my father's more.

or

Upon this day I married and deplore
That marriage deeply but my father's more.

However, this epigram, written on the same day, was finished.

To Penelope⁵⁹

or

On the same day to Medea

This day of all our days has done
The worst for me and you
'Tis just *six* years since we were *one* –
And *five* since we were *two*.



Lady Byron in old age (she died in 1860).

58: BLJ VIII 86.

59: This title appears in a version of the poem sent to Moore on November 5th 1820, which also contains *A year ago you swore, fond she!* (BLJ VII 219). For Annabella to be at once the faithful Penelope and the infanticide Medea is a hard test of her adaptability.