of *Childe Harold* the lines on Beckford dramatizing how social wrath threatened the exposed pederast:

Gainst Nature's voice seduced to deed accurst.

Instead, he published at the end of the volume the love poems to John Edleston. We may imagine the irony with which he read the praise heaped on them as the most sympathetic revelation of his art. The paradox reveals how deep the need was in his personality to assert his identity as a bisexual—he included also "To Florence" and other poems inspired by his fleeting passion for Constance Spencer Smith. It was entirely characteristic of Byron to wear his heart on his sleeve: he was the most confessional of poets. But the gesture also reveals his desperado side, his fatal determination to risk everything, in this case by making himself vulnerable to one of England's most deeply held aversions. His dishonest honesty proved in fact to be more daring than he intended. At the time he did not mean to linger in England, nor did he anticipate that he would become at once the center of national, European, even worldwide attention. But this notoriety made his position, in effect, more dangerous once he had published his semi-confession. The stage was set for misunderstanding and disaster: it appeared in the guise of a romantic young aristocrat, one of whose whims was to pursue Byron in the costume of her pageboy attendants.
Fame and Exile

With the publication of *Childe Harold*, Byron, until then known only as the author of a minor satire, became the center of what his contemporaries called the "Byronomania." No poet before or since has ever caught the imagination of so many readers in so many lands. No doubt his aristocratic status and his romantic looks helped his success, as well as his exotic subjects—Spain, Albania, and Greece. What is surprising is that the admixture of rakish cynicism and self-dramatizing guilt does not seem to have weakened the effect. But a taste for hero-villains was part of the literary fashion of the day, and in this respect, too, Byron was a storybook hero come alive. Then, finally, the Thyrza lyrics humanized him.

How potently the Thyrza myth worked can be seen in the case of Lady Falkland. This young widow, whom Byron had helped financially before he left for Greece but did not know personally, wrote from Derby: "Surely I cannot be mistaken! Byron, my adored Byron, come to me... Tell me, my Byron, if those mournful, tender effusions of your heart to that Thyrza... were not intended for myself?" Not surprisingly, Byron declined to answer her letters. But others of her class were more of a temptation to a young man whose intimate experiences with women in England had previously been confined to servants and prostitutes. The chief of these, drawn to him by his new fame, was Lady Caroline Lamb, who was to be,
during the four succeeding years he spent in England, his nemesis; indeed, her famous remark after meeting Byron—“mad, bad, and dangerous to know”—proved in this affair even more applicable to herself.

Like Lady Falkland, she was literary, self-obsessed, and romantic in the extreme. She had been born Caroline Ponsonby; her father was a second cousin of Sarah Ponsonby, whose elopement with Lady Eleanor Butler she had much admired. A relative had complained that the Irish Ponsonbys were always making sensations, and Caroline was equally intent on defying convention. At first Byron was flattered by her infatuation. This was his first grande affaire, played before the world’s eyes with a lady of rank and fashion. For a man of Byron’s insecurities, it was a flattering experience. William Lamb did not try to restrain his wife, whose conduct, in their circles, was only remarkable for its open daring, and for two months Byron seems to have enjoyed Caroline’s love and returned it.

She did not entirely fulfill his idea of feminine beauty: her figure he complained was not sufficiently “rounded.” But her elfin charm fascinated him and her devil-may-care defiance of the world at whose social pinnacle she moved. Perhaps her peculiar vulnerability also touched his heart. But for someone struggling to emerge from an idealized devotion to “Thyrza,” the affair had ironic overtones. Caroline was diminutive and epicene, her nickname was “Ariel,” and she has been described as looking like a fourteen-year-old boy. Her most famous portrait shows her dressed as a page. Indeed, one of her principal fads was to collect attractive young pages and to fit them out in splendid uniforms of her own design. Occasionally she herself adopted this disguise for clandestine visits to Byron. Her love of masquerade and intrigue comes out in a letter of instructions she wrote to Byron’s valet, William Fletcher:

I also want you to take the little Foreign Page I shall send you in to see Lord Byron. Do not tell him before-hand, but, when he comes with flowers, shew him in. I shall not come myself,
unless just before he goes away; so do not think it is me. Besides, you will see he is quite a child, only I wish him to see my Lord if you can contrive it, which, if you tell me what hour is most convenient, will be very easy.  

The punctiliousness of this plan to deceive Byron into thinking she is a boy, and then revealing herself, has an air of erotic fantasy about it.

R. C. Dallas, who had arranged for the publication of *Childe Harold*, had also appointed himself Byron's moral mentor, a role he filled with a certain pomposity. In a book published shortly after the poet's death, he lamented that Byron had "gained some important conquests over his senses" (under Dallas's tutelage), but he had had "these avenues of destruction to the soul . . . again . . . thrown open by the publication of the poem." One day he was perturbed to find Byron busy composing a letter to his mistress (i.e., Lady Caroline Lamb). When he returned next day:

the lady's page brought him a new letter. He was a fair-faced delicate boy of thirteen or fourteen years old, whom one might have taken for the lady herself. . . . He was dressed in scarlet hussar jacket and pantaloons. . . . He had light hair curling about his face, and held a feathered fancy hat in his hand, which completed the scenic appearance of this urchin Pandarus. I could not but suspect at the time that it was a disguise; if so he never disclosed it to me. . . . I do not precisely recollect the mode of his exit."

At one point, Byron and Caroline were close to eloping, but her public scenes, private tantrums, and jealous spying tried him sorely. Eventually her complete lack of discretion led him to break with her. Her mother and husband finally got her off to Ireland, but when she returned, she continued to harass him for years with passionate letters and unexpected visits.

At some point in the course of this romance or its dis-

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solution Byron was moved to tell Caroline about his bisexuality. We know of the scene not at first hand from either of the participants but from an account of Caroline's revelations to Lady Byron recorded by the latter shortly after her separation from her husband. Caroline also told Lady Byron that Byron had spoken of his incest with his sister Augusta, presumably some time after his affair with Caroline had cooled:

Since that avowal—Ly C— L— never suffered any intimacy with Ld B— though she had been prevailed upon to forgive "other & worse crimes"—. . . .

Of these she gave the following account—that he had (after touching distantly on the subject at different times, by allusions which she did not understand till subsequently) confessed that from his boyhood he had been in the practice of unnatural crime—that Rushton was one of those whom he had corrupted—by whom he had been attended as a page, & whom he loved so much that he was determined Ly C— L— should call her page Rushton—which she owned with shame she had done.

He mentioned 3 schoolfellows whom he had thus perverted. (N.B. two of their miniature pictures were burnt with a curious remark). . . .

Ly C. L— did not believe that he had committed this crime since his return to England, though he practised it unrestrictedly in Turkey—His own horror of it appeared to be so great that he several times turned quite faint & sick in alluding to the subject—

He concluded by threatening her in the most terrific manner, reminding her of Caleb Williams, and saying that now she knew his secret, he would persecute her like Falkland—he then endeavoured to regain her affection, whilst she sat filled with dread—and when he said "but you love me still"—answered "yes" from terror—he thrice obliged her to take the most solemn vow never to reveal—

Lady Caroline was not always a woman to be trusted where testimony about Byron was concerned. But these revelations have generally the ring of truth, even in their

4. LLB, pp. 243-44. Falkland, the villain of William Godwin's novel Caleb Williams, threatens to retaliate against his servant, Caleb, if the latter reveals his knowledge of a murder Falkland has committed.
apparent contradictions. We may wonder, however, at what point of their relation Byron made his confession. Presumably it was in the summer of 1812 when the affair was still mutual since she says that at that time he had prevailed upon her to forgive these "worse crimes" (worse, i.e., than the incest she was to learn about later when his feelings had waned), and he seems to have been concerned to keep her love. But what prompted this admission, which was to have such devastating consequences later? No doubt she had queried him about Thyrza—she speaks in one letter of taking Thyrza's place in his life—and this may have inspired some of the hints. Most likely, Byron was seeking sympathy and understanding. Perhaps he saw in this unconventional rebel another semioutlaw before whom he might drop his mask and reveal his tormented spirit.

In Lady Caroline, the heterodox rebel who admired "the Ladies" and such radicals as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, he had hoped to find a sympathetic confidante. As events were to prove, he could hardly have chosen worse. At first, she was shocked into speechlessness. Thereupon Byron's trust in her loyalty and discretion vanished, and his paranoia took over. Hence his attempt to terrorize her into silence. Eventually she must have recovered from her shock since she "forgave" him and even humored him by renaming her page, an odd bit of diablerie. (One recalls, by way of parallel, the way Beckford's infatuated cousin Louisa abjectly condoned his obsession with the young William Courtenay.) It would be interesting to know whether Caroline's assumption of her pageboy disguise antedated or followed his confession.

Though Byron finally became disgusted with her unbalanced and uninhibited pursuit, Caroline was determined at all costs not to be read out of his life. His damning con-

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fession was, she felt, one link he could hardly dare to ignore. Early in 1813, months after his passion had dissipated, she had with typical impertinence invaded Byron's quarters while he was away and written, in a copy of *Vathek*, "Remember me!"—the ghost's plea in *Hamlet*. Undoubtedly her choice of book and author implied a threat. Though the Beckford scandal had erupted four years before Byron was born, Beckford's name was still a byword for the homosexual who had been driven from English society. Given Caroline's reckless and vindictive temperament, her words must have struck Byron as unpleasantly ominous. This awareness explains the bitterness of the famous lines he wrote in reply:

Remember thee! remember thee!
Till Lethe quench life's burning stream,
Remorse and shame shall cling to thee,
And haunt thee like a feverish dream!

Remember thee! Ay doubt it not;
Thy husband too shall think of thee;
By neither shall thou be forgot,
Thou false to him, thou fiend to me!\(^6\)

Just how fiendishly Caroline was capable of behaving Byron was to discover later. Betrayal by spurned lovers has always been a danger for homosexuals and bisexuals, and Caroline's visit to Byron's estranged wife was only one stroke in a long campaign. On January 3, 1813, Byron wrote to Francis Hodgson: "You can have no idea of the horrible and absurd things she has said and done . . . since I withdrew my homage."\(^7\) and by April 6 he told Lady Melbourne that he held Caroline in "utter abhorrence," with a feeling so strong "it has poisoned my future existence."\(^8\) Three weeks later, she became sufficiently menacing for him to write in this vein:

6. *CPW*, 3:84; for McGann's dating of the poem, see ibid., p. 424.
8. Ibid., pp. 35-36.
If you still persist in your intention of meeting me in opposition to your own friends & of mine—it must even be so—I regret it & acquiesce with reluctance.—I am not ignorant of the very extraordinary language you have held not only to me but others—& your avowal of your determination to obtain what you are pleased to call “revenge”—nor have I now to learn that an incensed woman is a dangerous enemy.—Undoubtedly those against whom we can make no defence—whatever they say or do—must be formidable—your words & actions have lately been tolerably portentous—& might justify me in avoiding the demanded interview—more especially as I believe you fully capable of performing all your menaces—but as I once hazarded everything for you—I will not shrink from you—perhaps I deserve punishment—if so—you are quite as proper a person to inflict it as any other. You say you will “ruin me”—I thank you but I have done that for myself already—... it is in a great measure owing to this persecution—to the accursed things you have said—that I again adopt the resolution of quitting this country."

By this time, Byron had, of course, embarked upon a new affair with Jane Elizabeth, the Countess of Oxford. Cool and experienced, Lady Oxford was the opposite of the hysterical Caroline in everything except her amorous self-indulgence. The affair, however, brought no respite from Caroline’s histrionics, which troubled both the lovers. Byron can hardly have been tempted to repeat his experiment of telling his new mistress the facts about his sexual nature. He may, however, have given her some indication of the kind of thing Caroline might accuse him of without committing himself on the truth of the accusations.

Our chief knowledge of these matters comes from Byron’s numerous letters to Lady Melbourne, who did her best to keep Caroline, who was her daughter-in-law, in line. It had been proposed that Lady Melbourne be a third party at Caroline’s canvassed interview, but Byron had explained that he would prefer Lady Oxford. It would be “less awkward for me,” he wrote, “you will wonder why—

9. Ibid., p. 43.
& I can’t tell you more than that she might make some brilliant harangue to which [Lady Oxford] would be a less embarrassed listener than you could possibly be." This news must have puzzled Lady Melbourne, who, with voluminous epistolatory accounts of Byron’s entanglements with women before her, must have wondered what more there was about Byron’s life to know.

Since his return to England, Byron had spoken repeatedly of retiring again to the Mediterranean. In the spring of 1813 these plans took on a more serious color: he would probably have left then for the East if the plague had not broken out there. But something else also held him in England: he had begun an affair with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. In part, the very forbiddenness of such a relation made it attractive to Byron. Yet if it was, to use his own words, the “most perverse” of his entanglements, it was also the deepest and most serious. Augusta seems to have been the very opposite of the femme fatale type. Neither beautiful nor clever, she was, like Byron, shy, but unlike him she was timid and conventionally pious in a somewhat shallow fashion. Her friends considered her good and dowdy, and she was worrily devoted to a spendthrift husband and a brood of troublesome children. But she had humor and charm and the rare gift of being able to handle Byron in his difficult moods. If she had been an unmarried cousin or if England had been ancient Egypt or classical Greece, she might have made him a reasonably satisfactory wife.

Her feeling for her brother seems to have been less romantic than protective. Did she know the troubling secret of his homosexuality? The evidence on this matter is teasingly vague. G. Wilson Knight has argued that she did. He notes the anxious concern for her brother that commences about the time of his encounter with Lord Grey. Living in London, moving in court circles, and reading the papers of 10. March 14, 1813, BLJ, 3:26.
the day, she must have been keenly aware of the stigma any suspicion of homosexuality carried. Of the evidence cited by Knight, the most significant appears to be a letter Lady Byron wrote to Augusta on September 21, 1816, some eight months after she had left Byron. For the sake of intelligibility, I shall quote the passage at somewhat greater length than Knight does:

As to the impressions of my parents towards you, I feel that I ought to say a few words on their accounts, lest they should appear to have been actuated by an irrational spirit of resentment. After they became acquainted with what had been his habits of life, and decided propensities, previous to my marriage, and during a time when his general proceedings must have been known to you (and indeed he made it clear that they were known), it was their opinion that in allowing any young woman to be united to him, and still more in endeavoring to smooth the apparent obstacles, you were sacrificing her to the most remote possibility of doing him service in any but a worldly point of view.11

Lady Byron's style is maddeningly prolix and vague, but a reasonable interpretation of her words is that her parents resented Augusta's promoting her marriage with Byron, whom Augusta knew to be homosexual, when the marriage was not likely to change him but only to serve as a cover. Of course, everything here depends on how one interprets the word “propensities.” Obviously, this cannot refer to incest, and though it might in another context mean sexual activity in general, Byron's womanizing was so widely known and self-professed that it could hardly have been regarded as a secret known only to his sister. It is interesting to note Lady Byron's assertion that Byron told her of his sister's knowledge after this marriage had taken place.

Another passage Knight calls attention to is even more vague. But since it throws much light on the confidence that existed between Augusta and Byron and reveals clearly

what he sought in a relation with a "good" woman, it is worth considering. Lady Blessington, who interviewed Byron in Italy in 1823, reports him as saying:

To my sister, who, incapable of wrong herself, suspected no wrong in others, I owe the little good of which I can boast; and had I earlier known her, it might have influenced my destiny. Augusta has great strength of mind, which is displayed not only in her own conduct, but to support the weak and infirm of purpose. . . . Augusta knew all my weaknesses, but she had love enough to bear with them. I value not the false sentiment of affection that adheres to one while we believe him faultless; not to love him would then be difficult; but give me the love that, with perception to view the errors, has sufficient force to pardon them,—who can "love the offender, yet detest the offence"; and this my sister had. 12

Obviously, Byron wanted "good" women to act as confessors and confirm his sense of guilt. Given the intimacy between them on matters that deeply troubled him, it seems reasonable to assume that he communicated to Augusta his homosexual anxieties and found her sympathetically alarmed. It was also important to Byron that any confidante confirm his self-condemnation, and if Augusta sounds like a conservative Christian in her moral stance, we must realize that this is presumably what Byron wanted. But Byron was unorthodox on one point: he regarded his sins as inexplicable. Augusta complained that he had no belief in religious salvation; the damnation was selfdamnation. This was difficult for her to bear and still more for his wife later.

The mental strain of his liaison with Augusta reveals itself in the narrative poems Byron wrote in 1813 and 1814. These are the melodramatic Oriental tales, sensationally popular in their day, rarely read or admired now. Byron himself did not value them as poetry and excused them as necessary forms of psychological release. Of the second

tale—*The Bride of Abydos*—he remarked to Moore: "I have written this, and published it, for the sake of the employment,—to wring my thoughts from reality, and to take refuge in ‘imaginings,’ however ‘horrible.’" On the same day he wrote to Madame de Staël that the poem had been composed "in some of those moments when we are forced by reality to take refuge in Imagination—I am much more obliged to it than I ever can be to the most partial reader—as it wrung my thoughts from selfish & sorrowful contemplation—& recalled them to a part of the world to which I am indebted for some of the brightest and darkest but always the *most living* recollections of my existence."

Because he regarded these poems as exercises in therapy rather than literature, Byron was remarkably coy about their personal significance—even beyond his usual wont. *The Giaour, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair,* and *Lara* present the archetypal Byronic hero, adumbrated in Canto I of *Childe Harold* in his full colors—brooding, remorseful, proud, misanthropic, and wracked by the recollection of some mysterious guilt. In *The Bride of Abydos,* Byron introduced the theme that was troubling him most—brothersister incest, but with numerous equivocations. Though he had originally intended to make Zuleïka and Selim siblings, he retreated from this plan so that while Zuleïka at first believes her love for Selim is incestuous, she finds out later that they are only cousins.

In relation to this study, it is *Lara,* the last of the four tales, that is of most interest. If *The Bride of Abydos* toys with the possibility of incest and then tactfully negates it, *Lara* is a story that has suggestive pederastic overtones, though the hints, as befits this *even more controversial subject,* are more delicately developed. Strictly speaking, of course, it is not quite an Oriental tale. Its hero, Lara, has just returned from the Orient, but the setting is univer-

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salized. Lara’s name is Spanish, his page’s Arabic (Kaled), and his foe’s Italian (Ezzelin). Byron tells us the action is set in “no country and no age,” though the feudal background suggests western Europe.

In *Lara*, the Byronic hero appears in his most developed guise: he is violent and melancholic, and though capable of love and generosity, he is inexplicably alienated from his fellows,

Cut off by some mysterious fate from those
Whom birth and nature meant not for his foes.\(^{15}\)

Augusta, in a letter to Francis Hodgson, found the hero “wonderfully ressemblant” to her brother,\(^{16}\) and Lady Byron recorded a conversation on the subject that her grandson, Lord Lovelace, later published:

One of the conversations he then held with me turned upon the subject of his poems, and—tacitly between us—of their allusions to himself. He said of “Lara,” “There’s more in *that* than any of them,” shuddering and avoiding my eye. I said it had a stronger mysterious effect than any, and was “like the darkness in which one fears to behold spectres.” The remark struck him as accidentally more characteristic than he thought I could know it to be—at least I presume so from his singular commendation of it with the usual mysterious manner. He often said that “Lara” was the most metaphysical of his works.\(^{17}\)

The poem hints at some unnamed crime committed in the East:

All was not well they deemed—but where the wrong?
Some knew perchance—but ’twere a tale too long;
And such besides were too discreetly wise,
To more than hint their knowledge in surmise.\(^{18}\)

15. CPW, 3:243.
Lara is attended by a beautiful page, Kaled, who has left his Eastern home out of devotion to his master:

Light was his form, and darkly delicate
That brow wherein his native sun had sate,
But had not marred, though in his beams he grew,
The cheek whereof the unbidden blush shone through;
Yet not such blush as mounts where health would show
All the heart's awe in that delighted glow;
But 'twas a hectic hint of secret care
That for a burning moment fevered there. . .
Nor mark of vulgar toil that hand betrays,
So femininely white it might bespeak
Another sex, when matched with that smooth cheek. 19

Byron, in the preface to the anonymous first edition, equivocally hinted that the reader "may probably regard it as a sequel to a poem that recently appeared." 20 This has suggested to commentators that Lara's crime, like Conrad's in The Corsair, was piracy. But Byron's analysis of Lara's psyche suggests something more inward than this:

But haughty still, and loth himself to blame,
He called on Nature's self to share the shame,
And charg'd all faults upon the fleshy form
She gave to clog the soul, and feast the worm;
'Till he at last confounded good and ill,
And half mistook for fate the acts of will. 21

These lines certainly would fit a sexual proclivity better than an act of plunder. Byron's prefatory hint may perhaps be taken as a piece of deliberate obfuscation.

The action of Lara is, as Byron admitted, very slight. At a feast of nobles, Ezzelin suddenly recognizes Lara and threatens to expose his (unspecified) secret to the world. A time is appointed for the confrontation, but Ezzelin does not appear, and foul play is suspected. Civil war breaks out, and Lara, more for revenge on the society that treats

20. Ibid., p. 453.
him as an outcast than for any love of democracy, takes the popular side, playing the vengeful political role Byron had imagined for himself in his "Epistle to a Friend." He is killed fighting against great odds and dies touchingly in the arms of his page, who himself succumbs to grief—and is discovered to be a girl.

All this takes place amid dark hints and calculated ambiguities. Some parallels with Byron's life are unmistakable: the situation of a man fearing imminent exposure and ruin was one Byron had lived with for two years since his ill-advised confession to Lady Caroline. The epicene page has been compared to the page in Sir Walter Scott's poem Marmion (also a woman in disguise), to a girl in boy's clothes Byron was reputed to have kept in Brighton, and to Lady Caroline herself. However, it is hard to believe this relation did not have some homoerotic significance for Byron. The tradition of transvestite pages and warriors is a venerable

one in European romance and sometimes has a detectable homosexual overtone. In Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia (1590), Philoclea falls in love with the disguised Pyrocles and is appalled to think she is experiencing lesbian emotions. In Ariosto's Orlando Furioso (1532), Floridespina is attracted to Bradamante in her soldier's armor, but since Ariosto is Italian, she is less discomfited on discovering that her beloved is a woman. The ambiguities of Shakespeare's transvestite roles are well known. In Théophile Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), the hero of the novel falls in love with the eponymous heroine, whom he thinks is a boy; "he" plays Rosalind in As You Like It, who disguises herself as Ganymede, who then plays a girl's part for Orlando. Mademoiselle de Maupin herself later turns out to be bisexual, though she is less a believable character than an erotic fantasy of Gautier's. These stories of confused genders were sometimes clearly heterosexual in their titilla-

tions—a woman in man’s clothes was erotically exciting on account of her daring and her revealing costume, though the "actresses" who revealed their feminine charms by dressing as boys in Shakespeare’s day were boys. But in societies where straightforward representation of same-sex love was taboo, they also gave homosexual writers a chance for surreptitious romance. William Beckford used this device in his "Story of Prince Alasi," where the "boy" with whom the prince falls pederastically in love turns out to be a girl.

Byron, of course, does not go nearly as far as Beckford and indeed does not specifically make the relation an amatory one until the end. But there are hints that man and "boy" share a secret more damming than any heterosexual attachment. At one point, when Lara faints after a mysterious vision:

His page approach’d, and he alone appear’d  
To know the import of the words they heard;  
And, by the changes of his cheek and brow,  
They were not such as Lara should avow,  
Nor he interpret. 23

To the other possible inspirations for the Lara-Kaled story we must add Byron’s love for Nicolo Giraud, whom he here seems to fantasize as his attendant and as the partner in the final love-death.

Byron published Lara in August 1814, five months before his marriage. He had first proposed to Annabella Milbanke in September 1812, using her aunt, Lady Melbourne, as his intermediary. Byron entertained two different plans at this time. One, repeatedly considered, was to live abroad. The other was, if he remained in England, to marry. Did a concern about his homosexual impulses play any part in his decision to marry if he stayed in his native land? There is some evidence that it did. When An-

23. CPW, 3:222.
nabella rejected his first proposal, he appeared to take it calmly, telling Lady Melbourne: “She is perfectly right in every point of view, & during the slight suspense I felt something very like remorse for sundry reasons not at all connected with [Caroline] nor any occurrences since I knew you or her.”

Here Byron seems to be saying that something in his early life still troubled him. His remark suggests that his bisexuality propelled him toward marriage as a mode of escape. At the same time he was troubled about marrying a woman who was ignorant of his real nature. This is of course the eternal dilemma facing the male bisexual. Conventional friends and moralists frequently urge him to marry as a “cure” or a way of avoiding social difficulties; but others may condemn him with equal fervor as a monster if he does, especially if his wife is ignorant. As we have seen, Lady Byron’s parents adopted the latter stance. In such cases marriage is seen as a salvation, a pitfall, or a damnable crime, depending on its often unforeseeable outcome.

At the same time, men in this dilemma are often temptations to women who wish to help them, who are naive about the power and persistence of bisexual feelings. Annabella Milbanke, before she married Byron, was unaware of this aspect of his nature but nursed a mixture of sympathy and troubled hope, which has facilitated many doomed marriages. Sharing the passion for moral reform typical of her age, she has been called a “Victorian before the Victorians,” though in fact her “pre-Victorianism” was characteristic of a formidable faction in late Georgian society. With this mental outlook, Annabella was naturally fascinated by the idea of Byron as a moral client and piqued by the challenge of “saving” the foremost literary rake of the day, whose sensitivity and remorse she read as favorable prognostications.

After her refusal, Byron did not entirely lose interest. In

24. October 17, 1812, BLJ, 2:226.
August 1813, Lady Melbourne, now fearful of the consequences of Byron’s affair with Augusta (which he had hinted to her), encouraged her niece to reopen a correspondence. It is worth noting that Annabella’s salvationism, though bearing a certain resemblance to evangelicalism, was not quite orthodox but was marked by attitudes that had more in common with early nineteenth-century universalism. But this heterodoxy in no way diminished Annabella’s fervor as a moral missionary.

Early in our acquaintance [she wrote Byron in 1813], when I was far from supposing myself preferred by you, I studied your character. I felt for you, and I often felt with you. You were, as I conceived, in a desolate situation, surrounded by admirers who could not value you, and by friends to whom you were not dear. You were either flattered or persecuted. How often have I wished that the state of Society would have allowed me to offer you my sentiments without restraint. As the language of Truth I was not too humble to think them more worthy of you than the worldly homage of persons who were my superior in Talent. My regard for your welfare did not arise from blindness to your errors; I was interested by the strength & generosity of your feelings, and I honored you for that pure sense of moral rectitude, which could not be perverted, though perhaps tried by the practice of Vice. I would have sought to rouse your own virtues to a consistent plan of action, for so directed, they would guide you more surely than any moral counsel. 25

In short, Annabella, in reopening their correspondence, was clearly expressing her desire to become Byron’s spiritual mentor. Byron should have been warned off by her complacency (“I studied your character”), her priggishness, and the pat program she offered for his reformation. Yet while perceiving all this, he still played up to her, deploring his “ill-regulated conduct,” assuring her that for all his misogyny he thought “the worst woman that ever existed would have made a man of very passable reputation,” and at the same time scandalizing her in a way calculated