to bring her moralism to the fore by averring that "the great object of life is Sensation—to feel that we exist." He tempted her by telling her he had no "skeptical Bigotry," that he believed in God, and "should be happy to be convinced of much more," protesting that he would listen to her on sacred topics with pleasure. In the end Byron, usually the liveliest of letter writers, was composing epistles almost as solemn and serious as Annabella’s. Occasionally, he wrote in a breezier style, as when he recommended her to read René de Vertol’s history of revolutions in ancient Rome, which he had "met with by accident at Athens in a Convent Library," without, of course, explaining to her what this convent experience had meant to him. But eventually his moral seduction proved irresistible. Annabella finally accepted him as her fiancé in September 1814.

Obviously, Byron’s sense of guilt and hope for redemption propelled him toward this marriage. It was as though he were hypnotized by Annabella’s virtue. But both had severe misgivings. His unmanageable moodiness was a problem. At one point during their engagement, when Annabella pressed him to reveal his troubles, Byron turned livid and fainted. She later described the “frenzy of despair” in which he referred to “the Past as involving some fearful mysteries. A burthened conscience or an overwrought imagination were the only causes I could conceive. There was too much unequivocal mental excitement to make it possible for these expressions to be from the mere love of producing effect. I walked firmly on to the Goal, but with the conviction I had linked myself to Misery if not Guilt.” Byron himself had doubts and wrote to break the engagement, but Augusta, anxious about her own situation and hoping to find in marriage a solution for her brother’s manifold problems, dissuaded him from

27. September 26, 1813, BLJ, 3:120.
29. Lord Byron’s Wife, p. 231.
sending the letter. Irresolutely resolved, Byron proceeded at a snail's pace from London to Annabella's home at Seaham. Hobhouse, who accompanied him, noted that the bridegroom was "more and more less impatient."

The ceremony was scarcely over when the storm broke, and Byron's pent-up guilt, rage, and frustration overwhelmed him. In a dramatic scene the day after their marriage Byron told Annabella: "I have done that for which I can never forgive myself," and "I am more accursed in marriage than in any act of [my] life." "I am a villain—I could convince you of it in three words." He was too upset to discuss his troubles, and we are left to guess at what the mysterious words might have been. He dropped hints—one was "murder"—by remarking portentously that there were unpunished murderers walking freely in society. Byron implied that the deed had taken place in Greece and that Hobhouse knew the facts. One crime, he told her, was "another person's secret." This would seem to be a reference to his love affair with Augusta and suggests that the second word was "incest." When Annabella tried to get him to relieve his mind by talking during the early weeks of their marriage, he told her that she "could know nothing of the things to which he alluded—good women could know nothing." From this it appears that the third "crime" torturing his memory was "sodomy."

With so many sources of agitation, it is a difficult task to assess exactly what role homosexuality played in the fiasco of Byron's marriage. Doris Langley Moore has suggested that Byron's sense of his bisexual identity was threatened by his marital tie. As she notes in a subtle analysis in her essay "Byron's Sexual Ambivalence": "It seems ... that bisexuality may be at times a less bearable state than homo-

30. BB, 2:503.
32. Ibid., p. 258.
33. Ibid., p. 257.
34. Ibid.
sexuality, since, whatever fulfillment is attained, the lover in some strange spirit of contradiction is liable to feel that he is being false to his nature.” There is certainly evidence that Byron’s homosexual past continued to haunt him poignantly during his married life. But his love for Augusta was a much more immediately disturbing element. Whether or not he had shared Augusta’s anticipation that marriage would end the affair, once wed he seems to have passionately resented the barrier Annabella posed to its continuance. When he and his wife visited Augusta at her home at Six Mile Bottom, Byron made his preference for his sister all too clear through insinuating behavior. Once he realized Augusta regarded the physical side of their relation as at an end, Byron angrily turned against her also. Augusta had treated Annabella in a sisterly fashion from the start: Byron’s cruel and resentful behavior now drew the two women closer together. Annabella, for her part, was won over by the older woman’s kindness and solicitude. Nevertheless, when Augusta came to visit them in Piccadilly in April, Annabella was relieved to see her depart since she was sufficiently alarmed by Byron’s hints to be fearful that he would cajole his sister into resuming relations.

Given Byron’s premarital declaration that he meant to take Annabella for his spiritual guide, one might have expected some effort on his part, however feeble, to conform to her way of thinking. But naïveté and provinciality hobbled her. By taking an anthropological and historical view of morals, Byron soon put Annabella on the defensive. The ministering angel was invited to become the devil’s disciple. As Annabella wrote in a statement after their separation:

In his endeavours to corrupt my mind he has sought to make me smile first at Vice. . . . There is no Vice with which he has not endeavoured in this manner to familiarize me—attributing

35. LBAR, p. 456.
the condemnation of such practices merely to the manners of different Countries, & seeking either to ridicule or reason me out of all principle. He has said a wife was only culpable towards her husband if her infidelity were practised openly.36

To Annabella, whose sense of "moral rectitude" was the very essence of her being, this rational libertinism must have been profoundly shocking.

Undoubtedly the "vices" about which he now sought to enlighten her included homosexuality. His travels and his wide reading of classical and Oriental literature gave him an advantage, which he did not fail to press. Apparently, he did not limit himself to a diabolist stance but tried to make her sympathize with customs different from those she knew. Not surprisingly he ran into strong resistance:

He laboured to convince me that Right & Wrong were merely Conventional, & varying with Locality & other circumstances—he clothed these sentiments in the most seductive language—appealing both to the Heart and Imagination. I must have been bewildered had I not firmly & simply believed in one Immutable Standard. . . . It would have required an able logician than I was to expose the fallacy, when he stated such facts as that morality was one thing at Constantinople, another in London—and the requirements of Divine Law different in the time of Abraham & of Christ.37

The juxtaposition of London and Constantinople, of course, inevitably suggests the difference between Turkish and English attitudes toward homosexuality. The "seductive" language and appeals to the heart suggest that Byron told Annabella something of the idealistic side of Greek love. But Annabella was not one to let a sentimental appeal threaten her "one Immutable Standard."

Though Byron made no explicit personal confession to Annabella of his homosexual impulses, he seems to have dwelt on such matters often enough to have aroused her

37. LBAR, p. 443.
suspicion. How much he told her about his friendship at Harrow is not clear. Puzzled as she was by Byron's hints and intrigued by clues that might explain his psychology, Annabella did, however, take a keen interest in the letters from Harrow and Cambridge that Augusta showed her. "His earliest letters to A—— from school were romantic & open-hearted——by no means sensible, but their affectionate character was highly interesting." These were the letters in which Byron spoke repeatedly of his love for Delawarr and his detestation of Lord Grey. "It [i.e., Byron's temperament] changed between the age of 16 & 17, and she has often dwelt upon this change both to him——& to me in his absence——and he has acknowledged it with mysterious horror." This period, which included his last year at Harrow and his arrival at Cambridge, was when Byron seems to have realized the sexual nature of his feelings for schoolboys and for Edleston and the social disapproval such appetites might bring. "It took place in an interval of a parting and meeting between them, and the first letter in that altered style is short mysterious, & cold, with a tinge of malignity. He says——in another I think, for it appeared to mark some remarks of hers upon the change—that it was not owing to love——of this he solemnly assures her." 38 Augusta told Annabella: "From that time he was only a cause of misery to her." 39 Was Augusta referring solely to his financial difficulties, or was she indirectly hinting to Annabella that there was something in Byron's temperament that they must try to protect him against? Obviously she was trying to educate her and engage her sympathies by sharing the letters. She may also have been trying to imply that there was a disinterested side to her own affair with her brother.

Curious as she was about Byron's sentimental history, Annabella was inevitably fascinated by hints that he let fall about Thyrza. Nothing could demonstrate more tellingly

39. Ibid., p. 294.
Byron's simultaneous need to confess and to conceal than the way in which he tantalized her with details while repelling cross-examination on the subject.

The first time I remember his mentioning Thyrsa by name was at Seaham [in February 1815, a month after their marriage]. When he was talking over the names he had given to the personages in his poems, he said, "I took the name of Thyrsa from Gessner—She was Abel's wife"—and his tone of mysterious agitation precluded further inquiry, for I never had the disposition of Caleb Williams to kindle a consuming flame in the visible darkness of Suspicion. Another night (for he was always more open then than in the day) he said—after some expressions of affection which I hoped were genuine, though I felt all the misery by which they were overwhelmed—"I think I love you—better even than Thyrsa"—but he lamented that he could not feel as once he felt."

After expatiating on this emotional falling off, Byron told her that she could not possibly conceive "the oppression of his conscience—'What can you know (or what can a good woman know) of strong passions & c.'—and yet he was often on the brink of trying the effect of confession upon me." Later in the same statement, Annabella added more recollections:

He told me he had never read over the last Stanzas of [H[arold] H[arold] since they were written. He alluded to those which have the character of despair, occasioned I believe by the death of Thyrsa, & some remorseful recollections (from what causes I cannot tell, but they were plainly such) embittered & perpetuated his grief. . . . He mentioned Thyrsa to me but two or three times, but I felt that several associations recalled that being to his mind—& always with the deepest emotion. The mention of consumption of its delusive bloom—'yes, I have seen that'—would he say in a tone that "echoed to the heart as from its own." Of fair hair—I thought that in a large collection of hair which he once showed me, there was a beautiful tress of Thyrsa's by the feeling with which he regarded it."

40. Ibid., p. 282.
41. Ibid.
Then again later:

To return to Thyrza—He talked to me of her another time in London—at the period when Augusta was absent, for I wrote to her, said that he believed now she was gone, his breast was the sole depository of that secret—that he had never mentioned her name. He described her beauty as he has described beauty in the abstract—told me of the emotion with which he used to expect the hour of meeting, when he would walk up & down till he almost fainted, & said he was sure that such a state of excitation, if circumstances had not put an end to it, must have destroyed him.42

All this throws new light on the intensity of Byron's feeling for John Edleston at Cambridge and after. Apparently the latter had developed tuberculosis before he parted from Byron. The parting may have been the result of the high state of tension into which the unconsummated affair had thrown Byron. As to the remorseful thoughts that embittered his grief, Byron seems to have regretted his acquiescence in Hobhouse's determination that he should shun Edleston as a kind of betrayal; of this, however, we cannot be sure. Another remark recorded by Annabella tells us that Byron received a letter about Edleston on his way home from the East, presumably, like the "indecency" letter, from Francis Hodgson:

He spoke of the increasing induration of his feelings—that he could not now feel even for her as he had done. He had heard of her being well at Malta on his return from Greece, and at his arrival in England he learned her death.43

After she had left her husband in January 1816, Annabella set about writing lengthy memoranda that might be used should Byron attempt to gain custody of their infant daughter. These are devoted largely to her suspicions about Byron and Augusta, but occasionally references to

42. Ibid., p. 283.
43. Ibid., pp. 283–84.
other matters surface. The extracts from Annabella’s voluminous writings published by Malcolm Elwin in *Lord Byron’s Wife* are necessarily selective, and it is hard to guess whether further hints about Byron’s homosexuality exist among Lady Byron’s papers. Elwin, unlike other leading Byron scholars, regularly discounts the homosexual side of Byron’s life and fails to comprehend his experiences in Greece, taking the code phrase from Petronius to refer to conventional Casanovism. However, he does quote two interesting excerpts from Annabella’s “Statement G,” which he describes as “her case against Augusta.” One of the things Annabella feared she might have to explain in court was why she had invited her sister-in-law to Piccadilly Terrace on November 15 for her lying-in if she had suspected an incestuous liaison:

He told me to write to her of his vicious courses at the theatre, as if his taking a mistress was out of revenge towards her—and a greater injury to her than to me! . . . He desired me to send her some very unkind messages—and when she was come to Town said he did not want her then as he had formerly done. . . . I confess I had at that time so far lost the suspicions in which he was concerned [i.e., of incest] from the apprehension of crimes on his part yet more dreadful, that my only scruple in requesting her to come was lest she should suffer in any way from her interest for me—and particularly as to the pecuniary prospects of her children. 44

Later in the same statement Lady Byron claimed that she feared Byron might commit suicide and encouraged Augusta to stay with him on that account, referring once again to mysterious “practices”: “I had heard so much too of his addiction to other amours—besides the worse practices I suspected—that there was no ground for alarm on her account (vide her letters), & her remaining in Town really afforded me comfort during the early time after I left it.” 45 Elwin interprets the “more dreadful” crimes as refer-

44. Ibid., p. 330.
45. Ibid., p. 348.
ences to homosexuality but thinks they were "alcoholic ramblings" that Byron indulged in to shock his wife, thus giving the impression that Annabella had taken him seriously when she should not have. It is interesting to note that Annabella represents herself as so terrified at the hints of homosexuality at this time that fears about Byron's incest receded into comparative insignificance.

Lady Byron never speaks of more than suspicions in these matters. On January 3, 1816, Byron told her of his affair with the actress Susan Boyce and of "his intention to continue those courses, though tired of her personally." He took the position that a woman had no legal right to complain about her husband provided that he did not beat her or lock her up; and he added: "I have not done an act that would bring me under the power of the Law—at least on this side the water." This last may be taken as an assertion that he had not committed sodomy since his return to England, though it suggests that the situation had been otherwise abroad.

On January 15 Lady Byron left Piccadilly with their five-week-old daughter, Ada, ostensibly to visit her parents in Leicestershire, but in fact she was determined not to return unless Byron's violent and abusive behavior was due to insanity, a possibility she took seriously enough to consult medical opinion. She wrote him a warm and affectionate note. But when the doctors in London reported that Byron was not demented, she allowed her father to send a request, which Byron received on February 2, for a separation. Byron, not surprisingly, found it difficult to reconcile this turn of events with the tone of her previous letter. He was much taken aback and wrote in a dignified and restrained style to inquire if these were indeed Annabella's own personal feelings.

At this point, Lady Caroline Lamb, desperate to thrust

46. Ibid., p. 344.
47. Ibid., p. 400.
herself back into Byron's life and willing to go to any lengths, took advantage of the curiosity that was inevitably aroused by the breakup of the marriage. She began to spread stories of Byron's homosexuality, based on the ill-advised confession he had made three years before. On February 9, Hobhouse noted in his diary: "The Melbournes are in arms against Lady B. G[eorge] L[amb] called her a d'd fool, but added that C[aroline] L[amb] accused Byron of ———, poor fellow, the plot thickens against him." Hobhouse was to employ a long dash, which of course stood for the unspeakable vice of sodomy, repeatedly in his notes and memoranda of the next few weeks. On the twelfth, he repeated to Byron "what I heard in the streets that day—he was astounded indeed—!" Hobhouse now confronted Byron with other reports that he had heard from Byron's sister and cousin about his mistreatment of his wife, to which Byron confessed. "He was dreadfully agitated—said he was ruined, & would blow out his brains—he is indignant but yet terrified." Augusta, distraught over Byron's repeated threats of suicide, unwilling to give up the theory of madness, and still hoping for a reconciliation, wrote to Annabella on February 17:

There are reports abroad of a nature too horrible to repeat. I had guessed them from G. B.'s mysterious manner & excessive annoyance for some days past. He [George Byron, Byron's cousin] sent for Hobhouse, who I find last night informed B. of them, and G. B has desired me to inform you of them. Of course this has added considerably to his agitations. Every other sinks into nothing besides this most horrid one. God alone knows what is to be the end of it all."

Augusta expressed fears that Byron would poison himself with laudanum. "He said to me last night in an agony,

48. BR, 2: 376.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid, p. 413.
'Even to have such a thing said is utter destruction & ruin to a man, & from which he can never recover.'

Her lawyer had informed Annabella she had an adequate legal basis for a separation on the grounds of adultery and cruelty. But neither side wanted to go to court, and after elaborate negotiations, broken off and renewed, an "amicable" separation was arranged. In the meanwhile, Byron had to face a devastating trial at the bar of public opinion. Lady Caroline betrayed Byron a second time by adding to her first accusation the accusation of incest, which Hobhouse first recorded in his diary on February 29. Accusations of incest, if credited, were, of course, sufficient for social ostracism, but there is no doubt that the charge of homosexuality was far more serious. Incest, though sinful, was not unspeakable. It even had a certain vogue in the literature of the period. Schiller and Alfieri had based plays on the theme. In 1816, Leigh Hunt used it in his *Story of Rimini* and Byron in *Parisina*, in which the heroine, like Phaedra, falls in love with her stepson. In the next year, Shelley pointedly defended sibling love in the first version of *Laon and Cythna*. Later Wagner was to compose his most compelling love music (barring *Tristan*) for Siegmund and Sieglinde. But none of these liberals dared dramatize a same-sex relation. As for penalties, homosexuality was a hanging matter; incest, though not legal as some writers on Byron have supposed, was punished far less severely. Blackstone complained in his *Commentaries* that offenders were liable only to "the feeble coercion of the spiritual [i.e., ecclesiastical] court." In 1813, the sanction was further reduced by a new act of Parliament.

52. Ibid.
54. On February 7, during the separation crisis.
55. *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1769), 64. In England incest was not an offense at common law. No statute existed until 1908. Except for a brief time under the Common-
limiting sentences pronounced by ecclesiastical courts to six months' imprisonment.

On March 4 Lady Byron wrote to her mother: "The silence of my friends [who had refused to make public the grounds on which she was prepared to go to court] has been very disadvantageous to Lord B. in regard to opinion—since worse than the true causes are supposed." Annabella, of course, had her suspicions of incest and homosexuality confirmed by Caroline's revelations of March 27, which we have already noted. Caroline pretended to be motivated by pious contrition and a concern for Ada's welfare, but in fact she was playing a double game. Caroline afterward wrote to Byron to say that if Byron asked her, she would "swear I did it [i.e., made the accusations of homosexuality and incest] for the purpose of deceiving her [Lady Byron]. There is nothing, however base it may appear that I would not do to save you." Rarely has a lover scorned gone to such lengths of deviousness. But though the weapon of social accusation was wielded by someone half-demented, it was wielded to deadly effect. Two days before Caroline's visit to Annabella, Byron wrote to his wife:

My name has been as completely blasted as if it were branded on my forehead. . . . you are understood to say—"that you are not responsible for these [rumors]—that they existed previous to my marriage—and at most were only revived by our differences." Lady Byron they did not exist—but even if they had—does their revival give you no feeling? . . . is it with perfect apathy you quietly look upon this resurrection of Infamy?"
Hobhouse, ever the loyal friend and tireless ally, set about to mitigate the damage. After much discussion with intermediaries, including Byron’s cousin, John Wilmot, it was agreed that Lady Byron should sign a kind of disavowal of the rumors. This she did on March 9. In its final form, the much debated paragraph to which she affixed her name read as follows:

In reference to a paper communicated by Mr. Wilmot, Lady Byron declares that she does not consider herself in any ways responsible for the various reports injurious to Lord Byron’s character and conduct which may be circulated in the world. They have certainly not originated with or been spread by those most nearly connected with her. And the two reports specifically mentioned by Mr. Wilmot [i.e., the charges of incest and homosexuality] do not form any part of the charges which, in the event of a Separation by agreement not taking place, she should have been compelled to make against Lord Byron.50

This may have been strictly true, but the paragraph palpably left open a substantial question, that is, did Lady Byron, whether or not she intended to raise such issues, believe the charges to be justified by facts?

Byron signed the separation agreement on April 21 and four days later left England for an exile that was to last all his life. But in the meantime another storm had blown up, this time in the press. During the negotiations Byron had worked off the emotions developed by the tense situation in characteristic fashion, by writing two poems. One was the rhetorical and sentimental appeal to Lady Byron entitled “Fare Thee Well!”; the other was a rather vicious satire on her confidante, Mary Anne Clermont, which put special emphasis on her poverty and servant status. Byron discreetly ordered John Murray, his publisher, to print the poems and had them circulated widely, but he stopped

short of actual publication. However, by venturing into print, and especially by circulating the satire, Byron gave the hostile press the handle it was looking for.

Newspaper silence about his domestic affairs was broken by the *Champion*, apparently at the secret instigation of Henry Brougham, the radical member of Parliament, acting from motives that remain obscure. John Scott, the editor of the newspaper, published both poems and commented on Byron’s personal situation: “Of many of the facts of this distressing case we are not ignorant: but God knows they are not for a newspaper. Fortunately they fall within very general knowledge, in London at least—if they had not, they would never have found their way to us.” 60 The Tory press was more than glad to have a stick with which to beat a radical peer who had made himself unpopular by criticizing the Regent and praising Napoleon. But the *Champion* and Scott had a reputation for antigovernment liberalism, so politics was not ostensibly the motive for this attack.

Whether sincerely or not, the stance assumed by the *Champion* was that of guardian of national morals. The masthead of the paper included a sentence from Milton, “Let not England forget her precedence of teaching nations how to live,” and this seems to have been interpreted in an ethical as well as a political sense. Byron’s defenders (specifically the *Examiner*), it charged, sought “to destroy that moral strictness, which as a distinction between this country and others, is most scrupulously and fondly regarded.” Byron was associated by Scott with “the Anglo-Gallic school who have tried to introduce French laxness into England.” 61

Commenting on press attacks at this period, Byron was later reported by Thomas Medwin as saying that he “once made a list from the Journals of the day, of the different

worthies, ancient and modern, to whom I was compared. I remember a few: Nero, Apicius, Epicurus, Caligula, Heliogabalus, Henry the Eighth, and lastly, the King."

Nero, Caligula, and Heliogabalus were all notoriously homosexual or bisexual emperors. The purported writers may have intended innuendoes in their comparisons, but since these reports have not yet been identified, it is hard to be certain about the contexts. Leigh Hunt’s Examiner, in coming to Byron’s defense, deplored the “depraved speculations” of the “falsest and most brutal nature” that were circulating. Hunt referred to the “inconsistent and villainous accusations, some of them so monstrous, that even the first public propagators of the scandal professed the singular delicacy of being able only to hint at them. Hint at them however they did, and set the imagination of it’s mongers afloat, without any warrant whatsoever.”

But very few papers joined the Examiner on Byron’s side.

Byron sailed for Ostend on April 25. Was his leaving England a forced or a free decision? This has been a much debated question. In his biography of 1830, Thomas Moore, who observed the public reaction at first hand, mentioned certain “rumors” and declared that “such an outcry was now raised against Lord Byron as, in no case of private life, perhaps, was ever before witnessed.” Byron’s exile, he tells us, “had not even the dignity of appearing voluntary, as the excommunicating voice of society left him no other resource.” To this Hobhouse retorted in the margin of his copy of Moore’s book: “There was not the slightest necessity even in appearance for his going abroad.” But here Hobhouse must have been writing in a spirit of contradiction or out of

64. LIL, 1:653.
65. LIL, 2:1.
66. LLB, p. 295.
a compulsive need to defend his friend and minimize his unpopularity. Only one hostess had dared to try to stem the tide by inviting Byron and his sister to a social gathering, and at Lady Jersey’s famous party, they had to endure galling snubs.

An account of how Byron perceived his ostracism is given in Medwin’s Conversations. There Byron is represented as saying: “I was abused in the public prints, made the common talk of private companies, hissed as I went to the House of Lords, insulted in the streets, afraid to go to the theatre, whence the unfortunate Mrs. Mardyn [erroneously believed to be his mistress] had been driven with insult.”67 In 1819, after three years in Europe, Byron gave a fuller and slightly different account of his ordeal in the reply he wrote (but did not publish) to an attack that had appeared in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine:

I was advised not to go to the theatres, lest I should be hissed, nor to my duty in parliament, lest I should be insulted by the way; even on the day of my departure my most intimate friend told me afterwards, that he was under apprehension of violence from the people who might be assembled at the door of the carriage. However, I was not deterred by these counsels from seeing Kean in his best characters, nor from voting according to my principles; and with regard to the third and last apprehensions of my friends, I could not share in them, not being acquainted with their extent, till some time after I had crossed the Channel.68

Later, after Byron’s death, Hobhouse published a refutation of many passages in Medwin’s work. Ever reactive, he contradicted Medwin’s report with the terse denial: “Lord Byron was never hissed as he went to the House of Lords; nor insulted in the streets.”69 This cool rejoinder makes ironic a reading set against Byron’s statement that his “most intimate friend,” that is, Hobhouse, apprehended “vio-

68. Letters and Journals, ed. Prothero, 4:479.
lence from the people who might be assembled at the door of the carriage." Moreover, even this last statement does not quite give the full measure of Hobhouse's fears in April 1816. In a recently published letter to Scrope Davies, written in Venice on December 7, 1818, saying why he thinks it would be inadvisable to return to England to help Hobhouse in an election campaign, Byron explains to Davies that, when he left, "even Hobhouse thought the tide so strong against me—that he imagined I should be 'assassinated.'" 70 Byron adds that he himself is not and "never was apprehensive on that point."

Hobhouse's hysteria in 1816 seems to us today so melodramatic as to strain credulity. Yet of all those in Byron's circle, Hobhouse was the most level-headed and sober, to such a degree that his later eventual elevation to the cabinet and the House of Lords seems quite in line with this side of his temperament. But we must recall the intensity of the animosity that the British public, and especially street mobs in the Regency period, showed to men convicted of or even suspected of homosexuality. The newspapers recorded as a matter of course the appearance in the streets of angry crowds who threatened men who had been arrested on homosexual charges and the beating of men whose cases had been dismissed. Repeatedly they note that police escorts of forty or fifty constables were required to conduct these men through the streets, who would otherwise have been in danger for their lives. After his arrest in 1822, the Bishop of Clogher was menaced by such a mob, and at the height of the excitement over the Vere Street case the news of another arrest a few days later was enough to attract, on very short notice, a crowd of 5,000 hostile men and women in central London. As late as 1895 Oscar Wilde was attacked by onlookers on the way to prison. Set against this background, Hobhouse's fears, though overwrought, do not appear wholly ridiculous.

Teresa Guiccioli's account of Byron's "persecution" in her *Recollections* gives fuller details than Medwin and seems also to corroborate his report in the face of Hobhouse's demurrers:

It was at this time that, going one day to the House, [Byron] was insulted by the populace, and even treated in it like an outlaw. No one spoke to him, nor approached to give any explanation of such a proceeding, except Lord Holland, who was always kind to him, and indeed to every one else. Others—such as the Duke of Sussex, Lord Minto, Lord Lansdowne and Lord Grey—would fain have acted in a like manner, but they suffered themselves to be influenced by his enemies, amongst whom more than one was animated by personal rancour because the young lord had laughed at them and shown up their incapacity.  

This ostracism in the Lords must have been a galling humiliation to the always sensitive Byron. It was an ironic coincidence that homosexuality was at this time on the minds of the legislators of both Houses. A bill to abolish the pillory had been introduced the year before: we shall trace its fortunes in a later chapter. The parliamentary debates in the winter of 1816 showed that it would likely pass and that the abolition of this ancient punishment would at last exempt homosexuals from public torment. The proposer of the bill had made clear that he wished the reform to extend even to "that abominable offence, which was so disgraceful to human nature, and to which it had been so often apportioned." Sir Robert Heron, in the debate in the Commons, regretted this change as a step toward moral decadence. Speaking on February 22, 1816, two weeks after Lady Caroline had first begun spreading rumors about Byron, he pled for rigorous ostracism of suspected men should abolition come about:

The improved and mild morality of the present times had been disadvantageous so far as it was too lenient to crimes, and had

too much pity for former acquaintances and connexions. This sometimes paralyzed the arm of the law, and gave facilities for the escape of guilty persons. It sought to retain in society those who had disgraced it . . . Certain offences [i.e., sodomy] had of late much increased, and, he feared, owing too much to the prevailing mildness and indulgence . . . If such crimes were effectually checked in upper life, it would have a great effect. The wretch, who stood in little fear of imprisonment, pillory, or death, might perhaps be affected by the terror of perpetual disgrace and scorn.77

We must remember that the "mildness" Heron here refers to was embodied in a law code with over two hundred capital offenses, for which, on the average, seventy men and women a year were hanged, including some for sodomy. Heron's speech was reported verbatim the next day in the Times. It must have had an intimidating effect on men like Sussex and Grey. Given this moral climate, Byron's chilly reception in the House of Lords was unavoidable.

Not all the comment in the English press was hostile. Byron, as we have seen, had a few spirited defenders, and the Times dared to express the hope that his stay abroad would not be permanent.78 But Byron was to discover how little such a sentiment accorded with the generality of English opinion. The overwhelming majority of English people seem to have agreed with the poet in the Morning Chronicle who bade Byron return forthwith to Turkey

72. February 22, 1816, Parliamentary Debates (London: Hansard, 1816), vol. 32, cols. 804-05. However, it is likely that Heron's remarks were provoked not by the Byron scandal, which had just become a matter of rumor, but by the case of another member of Parliament, General Sir Eyre Coote, which had been publicized several months earlier. Coote, an aristocrat with huge estates, had fought in the West Indies, Belgium, and Egypt. He had been made a general in 1805 and served as lieutenant-governor and commander-in-chief in Jamaica. In November 1815, he was taken before the Lord Mayor for indecent conduct with the boys of Christ's Hospital School. After a military hearing he was stripped of his rank of general and degraded from the Order of the Bath. Coote had paid boys at the school to engage in mutual flogging. His friends argued that his actions were the result of mental derangement and tried unavailingy to mitigate his disgrace.

73. Times, April 24, p. 3, col. 2.
and Athens, an exhortation which no doubt concealed a veiled hint, or with another versifier, quoted by Thomas Moore, who wrote on the occasion:

From native England, that endured too long
The ceaseless burden of his impious song;
His mad career of crimes and follies run,
And gray in vice, when life was scarce begun;
He goes, in foreign lands prepared to find
A life more suited to his guilty mind;
Where other climes new pleasures may supply
For that pall'd taste, and that unhallow'd eye. 74

In the nineteenth century homosexuality was commonly regarded as the resource of jaded appetites; we may recall also Byron's reference to Beckford's "unhallowed thirst."

But English homosexuals were not simply ostracized on their native shores. A generation earlier William Beckford had complained to his daughter of the treatment he encountered abroad:

I have been hunted down and persecuted these many years.
I have been stung and not allowed opportunities of changing
the snarling, barking style you complain of, had I ever so great
an inclination. No truce, no reprieve have I experienced since
the first licenses was taken out . . . for shooting at me. If I am
shy or savage you must consider the baitsings and worryings to
which I allude—how I was treated in Portugal, in Spain, in
France, in Switzerland, at home, abroad, in every region. 75

In a later section of his defense of 1819, Byron gives a markedly similar picture of English implacability:

I withdrew: but this was not enough. In other countries, in
Switzerland, in the shadow of the Alps, and by the blue depth
of the lakes, I was pursued, and breathed upon by the same
blight. I crossed the mountains but it was the same—76

74 *LJI, 1* :654n. These verses seem deliberately to echo Byron's self-

satire, "Dameetas."

75 *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain, 1787–1788*,
this letter to his daughter, Lady Craven, was written about 1790.

76 "Reply to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine," in *Letters and Journals*,
ed. Prothero, 4:479.
until he found refuge in a Venice all but devoid of English residents. When Sir Walter Scott, reviewing Manfred in 1817, had dared to echo the Times’s hope that Byron “might yet return to England,” Byron had a chance to assess the reaction of Englishmen abroad. Scott’s wish, he reported, “gave great offence at Rome to the respectable ten or twenty thousand English travellers then and there assembled. . . . I was informed, long afterwards, that the greatest indignation had been manifested in the enlightened Anglo-circle of that year.”

As fate would have it, Henry Brougham, whom John Murray was later to identify as Byron’s “chief persecutor,” arrived at Geneva at the same time Byron did. On July 14, Brougham reported to a friend: “Lord Byron lives on the other side of the lake, shunned by all—both English & Genevese except Mad. Stael—who can’t resist a little celebrity—of what kind soever & with whatever vice or meanness allied.—” Madame de Staël had indeed pointedly refused to join the English in enforcing the cordon sanitaire that was supposed to isolate Byron. One is again reminded of Beckford’s difficulties on the same terrain. At that time Gibbon had played Brougham’s part in enforcing solidarity in the English ranks in Switzerland. But he had not been totally successful. In the 1790s Beckford had made friends with a young Irishman, Buck Whaley, who then received a public rebuke for daring to associate with the outcast. As Whaley told the story, Gibbon publicly declared “that it was astonishing any Englishman would visit a man who lay under such an imputation as Mr. B—- did; that even supposing him innocent still some regard was due to the opinion of the world; and he would venture to say, that I was the only one among my countrymen who had ever paid that man the smallest attention since his banishment.” Whaley, however, was not to be frightened: “The only re-

77. Ibid., p. 451.
ply I made to his impertinent animadversion was, that I did not look upon this little piece of history as any way deserving the attention of so great a man. The Duchess complacently smiled: the rest of the company looked grave; my pedant was dumb, and I took my leave.”

But more often, men inclined to break ranks with British society on such matters could be terrorized back into line. When Sir Richard Hoare visited Beckford at Fonthill in 1806, a group of neighbors intimated that he too would be treated as a pariah unless he could provide them with a satisfactory “explanation” of his conduct, upon which Hoare replied abjectly that his meeting with Beckford had been accidental. A decade later, attitudes toward Byron became another touchstone in British society. After Lady Jersey’s party, Annabella wrote to her mother that “Mrs. Ellison . . . says that now one has an opportunity of knowing who are bad & good—that there never was a question which disclosed morals so decisively.” What Bentham had written of “crimes against nature” in his essay “The Influence of Time and Place in Matters of Legislation” thirty years earlier was still patently true:

In England, not only the letter of the law makes them capital, as in other parts of Europe, but the law is carried into execu-

80. See Joseph Farington’s diary entry for October 16, 1806 (twenty-two years after the Powderham scandal):
Sir Richard Hoare of Stourhead applied to Mr. Beckford to see the Abbey which Mr. B. granted and attended Sir Richard when He came for that purpose. These civilities . . . were reported to the neighbouring gentlemen who took such umbrage at it, as conceiving that Sir Richard was giving countenance to Mr. Beckford that a gentleman wrote to Sir Richard in his own name & that of others to demand of Him an explanation of that proceeding as they meant to regulate themselves towards Him accordingly. Sir Richard applied to His friend the Marquess of Bath upon it, & represented that He had no further desire but to see the Abbey & the meeting with Mr. Beckford was accidental & to Him unexpected—Such is the determination of the Wiltshire gentlemen with respect to excluding Mr. B. from all gentlemanly intercourse. (*The Farington Diary*, ed. James Greg., vol. 4 (London: Hutchinson, 1924), 33)
tion with a degree of zeal which no other species of criminality is sufficient to inspire. [Even] the consequence of being reputed guilty [is] attended with a degree of infamy which can be compared to nothing so properly as that which attends forfeiture of caste among the Hindoos.  

Once he had left England, Byron’s mood was not one of philosophical reflection but of indignant fury. When Hobhouse chided him for the satire on his wife in Don Juan, he replied: “Was it not owing to that ‘Porca buzzera’ that they tried to expose me upon Earth to the same stigma—which Jacopo is saddled with in hell?”  

Jacopo Rusticucci was confined to the circle of the sodomites in Dante’s Inferno.) Nor was his later bitterness confined to his feelings toward his wife. As English morality had mobilized a whole society against him, so Byron’s hatred extended to his nation generally. Shortly afterward he wrote to Murray: “I am sure my Bones would not rest in an English grave—or my Clay mix with the earth of that Country:—I believe the thought would drive me mad on my death-bed could I suppose that any of my friends would be base enough to convey my carcass back to your soil—I would not even feed your worms—if I could help it.”

83. Bologna, June 7, 1819, BLJ, 6:140.
Perspectives: 1816–1821

In the second epoch of his life, after his rise to fame, Byron had taken his place among the literary, social, and political elite of his native land. At the beginning of 1816 he was a husband, a father, a best-selling author, a sought-after member of society, and a voting member of the House of Lords. Five months later, he was separated from his wife, his daughter, his sister, his male friends, Parliament, and his estate, with only his reputation as a poet untouched. Homosexuality, as we have seen, played a fateful part in this change in fortunes. Ironically, it now ceased (so far as we know) to be an important part of his experience until the final months of his life. At this point, then, it may be appropriate to glance back.

The traditional view of Byron, which held sway for more than a century, was that of a fervent womanizer **tout simple**; more recently this has been superseded by the admission that homosexuality played a minor but hardly significant part in his youthful life. The aim of this study has been to show that it meant more than this. It now seems possible to argue, on the basis of the evidence, that Byron’s bisexuality was far more central to his experience and personality than his biographers have so far been willing to grant. Whatever feelings he had about his initiation by Lord Grey, the experience revealed to him a side of his being that left him frightened, excited, perplexed, and, on occasion, exalted. At Harrow, at Cambridge, in Greece, and in the four years after he returned to England this knowledge haunted him. His love for his Harrow friends and for John Edleston, his anticipations of adventures in Greece, his