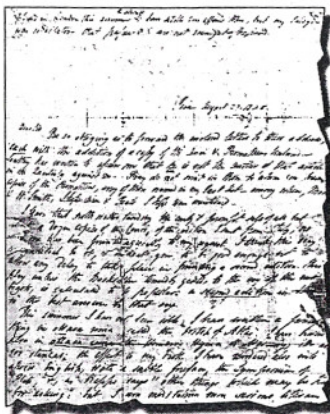




Ada Lovelace, Shelley's letter to Charles Ollier and (right) a portrait of Shelley



'The subject of love ...'

Shelley writing from Pisa, August 27 1820, to his London bookseller, Charles Ollier:

I learn that notwithstanding the early and prompt sale of all but about a dozen copies of the Cenci [a politically controversial play by Shelley] of the edition I sent from Italy, no other one has been printed agreeably to my request. I think this very prejudicial to it, and entreat you to be good enough not to allow any delay to take place in printing a second edition.

This play, unless the bookseller timidly yields to the cry of the bigots, is calculated to be popular. A second edition is the best answer to that cry.

Lady Byron to Ada Lovelace on November 13 (no year):

Dearest Ada:

It is my part to be a calm observer of your courses, and to employ my sympathies in estimating rather than exalting you. You gave an admirable account of duty when you said that it consisted in your 'putting and maintaining yourself in such a state, physical and mental, that God and his agents could use you' etc.

On the subject of love, I will [bequeath] you father's lines: 'For 'tis love's nature to advance or die. He stands not still, but or decays or grows Into a boundless blessing, which may vie With the immortal light in its eternity.'

And this is all I am able to say, for the Kingston coach is in a hurry too, as you may see ...

The loves, fights and politics of the great romantics

Find gives new slant on lives of Shelley and Byron

Martin Wainwright

Fresh light has been shed on the loves, squabbles and politics of the Romantic poets by the discovery of a Victorian autograph hunter's cache of original manuscripts.

Previously catalogued as a collector's ephemeral curiosity in a library at Newcastle upon Tyne, the spidery letters, including one written in a carriage bouncing between Esher and Kingston upon Thames, also reveal the early struggles of 19th century women to be taken seriously as scientists and mathematicians.

Although bought by a wealthy Tyne shipowner, John C Brooks, merely for the famous signatures, they include exchanges between Lord Byron's only legitimate daughter, Ada Lovelace, and the computer pioneer Charles Babbage. They show how Ada's mother, in spite of the poet's infidelity and desertion, used his verses to fortify her daughter's resolve to attempt an independent career.

The bundle was tracked down by a postgraduate student, Christopher Goulding, in the course of researching papers of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle at North-

umberland record office. He said the letters had been indexed, and a reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley had been noted, but scholars had apparently assumed that the material was simply a pile of courtesy letters to an autograph seeker.

Instead, the solitary, handwritten Shelley letter includes significant references to the poet's political tract A Philosophical View of Reform, showing that it occupied Shelley for almost a year longer than had been thought. It also challenges long-held views about rivalry between the poet and his contemporary Robert Southey.

Writing to his London bookseller on August 27 1820, two years before he drowned at sea, Shelley says Southey had just assured him that a biting anonymous critique in the Quarterly magazine was not his work — an authorship later assumed by historians.

The Shelley letter also expands on his frustration that the bookseller, Charles Ollier of Vere Street, London, was being too timid about publishing his political material because of "the cry of the bigots".

The letters, which have received preliminary authentication from scholars at the

Bodleian library, Oxford, and Newcastle university, where Mr Goulding, 40, is studying Shelley's life and work, add fresh pieces to the jigsaw of Ada Lovelace's life.

The Ada letters were written in the 1840s and 1850s. One suggests strongly that she helped to prepare punch cards for Babbage's original "computation machines".

Others bring out the eagerness of her scientific interest in exchanges with Lady Byron, who reports to her daughter on visits from the inventor of the kaleidoscope, Sir David Brewster, and the scientist Sir Charles Wheatstone, inventor of the polar clock.

Ada's ambitions were cut short by her death at 37 from uterine cancer, but the letters show clearly how a woman's Victorian lot was always threatening to close career doors.

Even Babbage infuriated her by telling her husband, William, Earl of Lovelace, not to take up a railway career because a man with his means should not trouble to look for work. "You cannot conceive the mischief you have done me by dissuading Lovelace from taking part in the proposed Central Railway," she writes, furious that her own ploys will

be threatened by the Earl mooching around demanding her time and energy. "You can have no conception of what my husband is like when his home alone occupies his irritable energies."

Mr Goulding, who worked in the theatre and as a civil servant before becoming a student, said the discovery of the autograph collection — "potentially a literary goldmine" — was "the sort of thing every academic dreams about. I couldn't believe my luck."

Most of the 12 volumes of letters, compiled between 1850 and 1894 by Mr Brooks, had yet to be scrutinised. "They are jam-packed with famous names"

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