

Jamie Kemman

Prof. Jason Miller

CIS-211-02

2-28-2024

### Ada Lovelace and Patriarchy in Regency England

Ada Lovelace is perhaps one of the most well known historical figures in not only the field of Computer Science but also in the general realm of pioneering women scientists and mathematicians. Ada, like many women before and after her, defied the artificial bounds of the vehemently patriarchal society of her upbringing to find success and fulfillment in a field of mathematics almost exclusively dominated by men. Ada's crowning achievements have seen her canonized as the first computer programmer, and that title, though formidable on its own, projects an even greater presence when considering the preliminary hurdles of simply existing as a woman within the context of Regency and Victorian England. This biographical essay will highlight instances within the first few years of Ada's life where, both directly and indirectly, her agency was reduced simply by virtue of gender and patriarchy dictated the course of events.

Being the only legitimized child of Lord George Gordon Byron and only child of Annabella Milbanke, Baroness Wentworth, it is worth noting Ada was born deep into the privileged upper crust of English society, and this is where she spent her life (Charman-Anderson). Arguably, this relative freedom from the dire economic toil experienced toward the bottom rungs of the contemporary class system is what allowed her the time and ability to pursue mathematical study. However, this privilege did not shield her from the patriarchy, enacted both through law and cultural practice, of English society at large. Only a month after Ada's birth, and only a year after her marriage, Annabella Milbanke split from her mentally unstable and morally unscrupulous husband and, despite the custody laws of the time, took Ada with her to live apart from Lord Byron (Charman-Anderson). Because of Lord Byron's

contemporary celebrity status, the draw of his scandalous and incestuous affairs, separation from Annabella, and subsequent departure from England (Charman-Anderson), even the presence of his infant daughter was enough to generate a stir of superstitious speculation around her future. In *The Bride of Science*, a biography of Ada's life, author Benjamin Woolley writes,

During a visit to Ely, where Annabella was being shown round the cathedral by the dean's wife, a crowd gathered at the inn where she and her baby daughter were staying, hoping to catch a glimpse of the infant Byron, wondering if they might spot the buds of angel's wings on her back, or of devil's horns on her brow. The same had happened at Peterborough. (85)

Though she resided with her grandparents for the duration, the first few years of Ada's life were marked by Annabella's fight to maintain the moral high ground of societal perception necessary to uphold both the custody of a child and continued marital separation under the patriarchal favoritism of contemporary religious law and practice (Woolley, 85-86). For example, Ada's grandmother, at Annabella's request, kept at-ready a trove of letters proving the "maternal concern" necessary to justify Annabella's endeavors (Woolley, 86). This was not without due cause, for as Woolley writes, "Women were simply not expected to 'desert' their husbands, no matter how dreadful the domestic despotism they had to endure. The only possible mitigation was the welfare of a child" (86). These examples serve to highlight Ada's immediate role to society not as an independent being who would develop thoughts and hopes, but of a token of good or ill to be used, by proxy of her mother, as a bargaining chip for the sake of both their futures. Of course, once this brighter future was secured, Annabella (who herself had received an uncommonly thorough education) endeavored to surround Ada with a rigorous analytical curriculum (Charman-Anderson). Even this education, however, was not solely for the sake of imparting knowledge. It seems Annabella, concerned over the contemporary theory that Ada could 'inherit' the same madness and moral failures of her father, intended for this education to be as much an

exercise in discipline and obedience (and therefore a guard against the sins of Lord Byron) as it was for Ada's enrichment (Woolley, 9-10).

### Works Cited

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