

Jane Austen, Caroline of Brunswick, and the Prince of Wales
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On Monday, February 15, 1813, the *Hampshire Chronicle* published a letter from the Princess of Wales to her estranged husband, laying out her grievances. The very next day, Jane Austen wrote to Martha Lloyd, "I suppose all the World is sitting in judgement on the princess of Wales's Letter. Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her Husband." But, she said: "I can hardly forgive her for calling herself 'attached & affectionate' to a Man whom she must detest—and the intimacy said to subsist between her & Lady Oxford is bad." As she concluded, "I do not know what to do about it;—but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had only behaved tolerably by her at first." The Duke of Clarence, later William IV, would express a similar view: "To be sure he has married a very foolish, disagreeable person, but he should not have treated her as he has done."¹

Austen's outspoken letter may have survived because she sent it to her friend Martha rather than to the protective and devoted Cassandra, who would burn most of her sister's letters. Austen possessed extensive knowledge of the royal couple, thanks to personal connections and a wide range of informants she called on January 10, 1809 "my most political Correspondants [sic]." As well as Martha, they included her mother's gossipy cousin Mrs. Cassandra Cooke, her naval brothers Francis and Charles, and her banker brother Henry, who supplied loans to an impressive circle of high and mighty clients from his home in Henrietta Street, London. In the explosion of print culture, newspapers and caricatures also printed royal news and gossip. Even though Austen could not comment publicly about the

¹ David, Saul. *Prince of Pleasure: The Prince of Wales and the Making of the Regency* (New York: Grove Press, 1998): 187.

prince, she would reveal her opinion by satirising him as John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, then as Sir Walter Elliot and William Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*.

Austen may have been one of the first people in England to hear news of Caroline, because her brother Frank, who had served in the squadron bringing her to England, surely reported on the lack of personal hygiene that would scupper the relationship from the start. At Caroline's first meeting with the regent, he exclaimed, "I am not well: pray get me a glass of brandy." Even before Caroline left home, Lady Jersey, the regent's mistress, had advised her to take lovers. She arrived late to greet Caroline, persuaded her to wear unbecoming clothes, and recommended that she rouge her already highly-coloured cheeks. As an additional insult, the prince regent appointed Lady Jersey as her lady-in-waiting. Rumor said that she dropped some evil-smelling substance into Caroline's hair, put Epsom salts in her pastry, and added strong spirits to her wine to persuade the queen that her new daughter-in-law was a drunkard.²

After the prince's reluctant and bigamous marriage on April 8, 1795, he brought his new bride to Kempshot Lodge, where he had previously lived with Mrs. Fitzherbert. On their nightmarish honeymoon, he paid open attention to Lady Jersey. His "very blackguard companions," as the Earl of Minto called them, were "constantly drunk and filthy, sleeping and snoring in boots on the sofa." The whole scene, he said, "resembled a bad brothel more than a Palace." As Caroline complained, "Judge what it was to have a drunken husband on one's wedding day," for he "passed the whole of his bridal-night under the grate, where he fell, and where I left him." Shortly afterwards, he brought Lady Jersey to Kempshot instead

² Jocelyn Harris, *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017), 178.

of his new wife. In October 1795, having done "irreparable damage to the morals of his neighbours," he rented a property elsewhere.³

Meanwhile, the twenty-year-old Austen was living at Steventon, only three miles away. Her brother James went often to hunt at Kempshot Lodge, and whenever she and Cassandra walked to the Wheatsheaf Inn, Basingstoke, to collect the mail, they would have heard about the Royal Hunt Club parties held there by the prince. He had already scandalised the neighborhood by entertaining Mrs. Fitzherbert at Kempshot, demanding land from the powerful Chute landowners of the Vine estate in Hampshire, and leading "quiet old country squires" into "unwonted extravagance." To keep up with royal demands on their hospitality, "they indulged in orgies at variance with their former habits, while their ladies were horrified at the company which H. R. H. preferred to their own." Guests forced to match him drink for drink discovered that dining at Kempshot was "a matter of no little danger".⁴ Over several years, therefore, Austen must have been an attentive witness to the vulgar, boorish, and extravagant ways of her royal neighbor.

When Austen wrote that she was resolved at least always to think that Caroline would have been respectable, "if the Prince had only behaved tolerably by her at first," she would know, as the world knew, that in 1796, three days after the princess gave birth to Princess Charlotte, he wrote a will declaring that Mrs. Fitzherbert was his only true wife, and left one shilling "to her who is call'd the Princess of Wales." Neglected, bored, lonely, and resentful, she became increasingly eccentric and promiscuous. In 1796, the royal couple separated, and in 1806, allegations about her immorality led to an inquiry called the "delicate investigation."

³ Harris, 178-179.

⁴ Harris, 176-77.

Like the many other women who regarded her as a wronged wife persecuted by the royal philanderer,⁵ Austen defended her simply because she *was* a woman.

As to the Prince of Wales, Austen satirised him obliquely but savagely in her fiction, first as John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, then as Sir Walter Elliot and William Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*. Just like the prince, Thorpe is a speedster, hunter, horse racer, and tippler, who enjoys the company of the lower orders. He swears, lies, uses coarse language, mocks his mother as the prince mocked his parents, and speaks voyeuristically about women, as did the prince.⁶

In *Persuasion*, Sir Walter Elliot, the dandyish and deeply indebted voyeur, represents the prince regent, for whom Austen's repeated word "retrench" was code. Sir Walter asks, "Can we retrench? does it occur to you that there is any one article where we can retrench?" and in 1816, just as Austen was writing *Persuasion*, George Cruikshank published *Economy*, where Lord Chancellor Brougham cries out, "Retrench! Retrench, reflect on the distressed state of your country, & remember the Security of your Throne rests on the happiness of y^e People." Like the regent condescending to postpone renovations to Carlton House, Sir Walter cuts off "some unnecessary charities," refrains from new-furnishing the drawing-room and takes no present down to Anne. Lady Russell speaks openly to the regent as well as Sir Walter when she asks, "What will he be doing, in fact, but what very many of our first families have done, or ought to do?"⁷

The behavior of Sir Walter's nephew and heir William Walter Elliot likewise echoes the regent's. Though speaking disrespectfully of Sir Walter and the honours he will inherit, Mr. Elliot is far too eager to seize them, just as the regent was impatient to grasp his

⁵ E. A. Smith, "Caroline [Princess Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttele] (1768–1821)," *Oxford History of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), January 3, 2008.

⁶ Harris, 168–171.

⁷ Harris, 192–194.

inheritance from the parents he routinely mocked. In the same novel, the phrase "the rising sun" particularly alludes to the regent's unconcealed impatience to become another Sun King. On November 13, 1815, Austen had visited Carlton House, and seen for herself the lavish design and gilded contents confirming his extravagance and treasonous francophilia.⁸

Finally, Austen's remark that the intimacy between Caroline and Lady Oxford was "bad" reveals that she also knew a great deal about Jane Harley, Countess of Oxford and Countess Mortimer. Though married to Edward Harley, 5th Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer, the countess took lovers from the pro-Reform party, including radical politician Sir Francis Burdett and Lord Byron. The Harley marriage was never a love match, and due to uncertainties about whether her husband was the father of her many children, they were dubbed the "Harleian Miscellany." But her infidelities proved too much even for easy-going Regency aristocrats, and few would receive her.⁹ Austen, who boasted on May 12, 1815 that she had "a very good eye at an Adulteress," knew full well that Lady Oxford was an exceedingly unsuitable friend for a princess struggling to defend her reputation.

Austen was never more than a few degrees of separation away from Caroline as well as George. For instance, Mrs. Austen's gossipy first cousin Cassandra Cooke probably told the family that the Lock and Angerstein families, her grand neighbours in Great Bookham, were on the princess's side. Mrs. Cooke may also have told the Austens that the princess had made Elizabeth Jennings, the Locks' daughter-in-law, her friend and confidante. From 1804 to 1809, Caroline stayed several times with the Locks, and was on amicable terms with the Angersteins.¹⁰ Austen died in 1817, and Caroline, now queen, came to trial in 1820.

⁸ Harris, 194–197 .

⁹ "Jane Harley, Countess of Oxford and Countess Mortimer," *Wikipedia*, March 24, 2019.

¹⁰ Harris, 177–178.

Although Caroline had faults, Jane Austen defended her as one woman to another. As a patriot, however, she hated Caroline's husband, a man not fit to be king, a man who risked revolution by arousing popular discontent in her beloved country.