Incest is Best—the Aristocratic Vice

Shelley - “Love’s Philosophy”

The fountains mingle with the river
  And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
  With a sweet emotion;

Nothing in the world is single;
  All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
  Why not I with thine?—

See the mountains kiss high heaven
  And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
  If it disdained its brother;

And the sunlight clasps the earth
  And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
What is all this sweet work worth
  If thou kiss not me?

Lord Byron – from *Manfred*

[...]
She was like me in lineaments—her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften’d all, and temper’d into beauty . . .
I loved her, and destroy’d her!

If I had never lived, that which I love
Had still been living; had I never loved,
That which I loved would still be beautiful—
Happy and giving happiness. (II.ii.193-6)

From Cain (1821)

From Was not he, their father,
Born of the same sole womb in the same hour
With me? Did we not love each other? And
In multiplying our being multiply
Things which will love each other as we love
  Them ...? (I.ii.367-72)

Things to notice—

The poem written in the tradition of Courtly Love and need not be taken very seriously as an assault on the young lady’s virtue. It displays some artful features which are characteristic of Shelley’s love poems. Firstly, a high degree of assonance and alliteration which makes the poem unusually melodious. Secondly, there is an insistent use of the verbs *mix, meet, mingle, clasp, kiss* which simultaneously conveys the idea of vegetal and human processes. Thirdly, it exhibits a touch of metaphysical wit. We certainly should not miss the clever alternation between *sweet emotion* and *sweet work* in each stanza, suggesting a further argument for making love. (Love-as-work is a familiar oxymoron.) Apart from that, the poem dallies with a daring notion of the two genders as *brother* and *sister* as well as Platonic opposites—a notion that reflects the high frequency of incestuous love in the lives and writings of the Romantic poets. Indeed, a theory about the origins of English Romanticism in incestuous bonds is not unthinkable, with William and Dorothy Wordsworth—those great collaborators at work on his career—at the foundations.

‘**Shelley** flirted with the young and attractive Sophia Stacey, a ward of one of his uncles, who came with her chaperone to visit Mary Shelley and him in Florence in December 1819. Mary commented that “the younger one was *entousiasmée* to see him - the elder said he was a very shocking man.” Whilst Mary stayed at home looking after their child, Shelley would take Sophia and her chaperone out to the galleries. Sophia, Mary admitted, "sings well for an English dilettante" and Shelley wrote her several lyrics, including this one. (ee Nicholas Albery, *Poem for the Day*, London: Chatto & Windus 2001, ftn.)

Lord Byron had a life-long infatuation with his half-sister Augusta Leigh (née Byron), the daughter of John “Mad Jack” Byron. Leigh, has he called her, was forced to marry a soldier who was himself her own cousin and he died young through dissolution and left heavy ambling deaths. Byron’s letters to her are full of affection and perhaps pretended passion: “When you write to me speak of yourself—& say that you love me—never mind common-place people & topics—which can be in no degree interesting—to me who see nothing in England but the country which holds you ... They say absence destroys weak passions—& confirms strong ones—Alas! mine for you is the union of all passions & of all affections—I do not speak of physicaldestruction—for I have endured & can endure much—but of the annihilation of all thoughts feelings or hopes—which have not more or less a reference to you. (BLJ VI:129-30)

A daughter born to Augusta may have been Byron’s. There is a letter to Lady Melbourne, speaking of a visit to Augusta and her child,in which he seems to say that he is in fact the father. Bearing in mind his genitically deformed foot, the assertion that the child is no ‘ape’ seem to say as much—and roundly confesses his love for her: ‘"Oh! but it is 'worth while', I can't tell you why, and it is not an "Ape", and if it is, that must be my fault; however, I will positively reform. You must however allow that it is utterly impossible I can ever be half so well liked else-where, and I have been all my life trying to make someone love me and never got the sort I preferred before." Augusta later married Georgiana off to one Henry Trevenion, her lover, and later Trevenion left Georgiana for her sister Medora, living with her scandalously in France. In 1840 Medora broke free and married a French soldier.