DAISY HAY

MR & MRS DISRAELI

A Strange Romance

Contents

About the Book

Deep in the archives of the Bodleian Library lies a tattered scrap of paper with newlyweds' scribbles on it. It is a table, listing the qualities of a couple. One column reads 'Often says what he does not think', 'He does not show his feelings', 'He is a genius'; the other 'Never says what she does not think', 'She shows her feelings', 'She is a dunce'. The writing is Mary Anne Disraeli's: the qualities listed contrast her with her husband, Benjamin Disraeli, one of the foremost politicians of the Victorian age.

The daughter of a sailor, on her second marriage and 12 years older than her husband, Mary Anne was highly eccentric, liable to misbehave and (worse still) overdressed for grand society dinners. Her beloved Diz was of Jewish descent, a mid-ranking novelist and frequently mired in debt. He was fiercely protective and completely devoted to his wife. She, too, was devoted to him, and they were both devoted to the idea of being devoted. They wrote passionate letters to one another through their courtship and their marriage, spinning their unconventional tale into a romance worthy of the novels they so loved.

Reading between the lines of a great cache of their letters and the anecdotes of others in chilly Oxford reading rooms, Daisy Hay shows how the Disraelis rose to the top of the social and political pile. Along the way, we meet women of a similar station and situation whose endings were far unhappier than Mary Anne's, acting as a counterpoint to her fairy tale ending as the landed Angel of the Prime Minister's House.

In an age where first ladies are under ever-increasing pressure to perform and conform, *Mr and Mrs Disraeli* offers a portrait of one who refused to do either, in a society which demanded she do both.

About the Author

Daisy Hay was born in Oxford in 1981. She is the author of *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives*, for which she was awarded the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize by the British Academy and highly commended by the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. She has a BA and a PhD in English Literature from the University of Cambridge and an MA in Romantic and Sentimental Literature from the University of York. In 2009-10 she was the Alistair Horne Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford and in 2010-12 she held a visiting scholarship at Wolfson College, Oxford. In 2012-13 she was a Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. She is currently a Lecturer in English Literature and Archival Studies at the University of Exeter, and a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Thinker. She lives in Devon.

ALSO BY DAISY HAY

Young Romantics

List of Illustrations

9. Mary Anne Viney-Evans, Chalon (1840). Hughenden Manor, © Bridgeman Images

10. John Evans. Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images / Thomas Boggis

11. Wyndham Lewis. Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

12. Rosina Bulwer Lytton

13. Edward Bulwer Lytton, engraving after Chalon. © City of Westminster Archive Centre / Bridgeman Images

14. Lady Blessington, James Godsell Middleton (c. 1872). Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

15. List written by Mary Anne Disraeli. Reproduced by kind permission of the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

16. Letter written by Mary Anne Disraeli. Reproduced by kind permission of the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

17. 1837 election poster. Reproduced by kind permission of the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

18. Hughenden Manor, South side, E. Buckton Lamb, 1862. Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

19. View North West across the Library at Hughenden, photographed soon after Disraeli's death, 1881.

Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

20. The parterre and south front of the house at Hughenden. © National Trust Images / Andrew Butler

21. Mary Anne Disraeli, James Middleton. Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images

22. Letter written by Benjamin Disraeli, 1874. Reproduced by kind permission of Hughenden Manor, the Disraeli Collection, © National Trust Images / Sue James

23. Benjamin Disraeli, D. and W. Downey, 1873. © Bridgeman Images

For Matthew and Freddy

MR AND MRS DISRAELI

A STRANGE ROMANCE

Daisy Hay

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Preface

‘My wife is a very clever woman’, Disraeli is reputed to have said, ‘but she can never remember who came first, the Greeks or the Romans.’ Benjamin and Mary Anne Disraeli are figures around whom anecdotes coalesce: about what they wore, what they did and what they said. Mary Anne apparently told Queen Victoria that she always slept with her arms around Disraeli’s neck. Disraeli, when asked if he had read a new novel, is rumoured to have replied, ‘When I want to read a novel I write one.’ If one were to read something other than a novel one had written, he had views about what that work should be too. ‘Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is life without theory.’

When the Disraelis were born, government was organised according to aristocratic faction; they died in the era of professional politics. In their lifetimes Britain’s empire grew until it covered swathes of the globe. They witnessed the development of rail travel, photography and the telegraph, and the transformation of their country from an agricultural to an industrialised nation. Their story is history, despite Disraeli’s disavowal of the subject. But it is also a fiction. Those who disliked them thought their romance artificial, its grand gestures contrived. Those who were fond of them thought there was something fantastic about their good fortune. They themselves spun stories around their partnership, but they also made the tales they spun come true.

This book is about the way in which the Disraelis conjured their romance into being in a world thick with stories. In their youth they read versions of themselves in

the epistolary novels of the late eighteenth century; in the 1820s and 30s they saw their aspirations reflected in the silver-fork novels Disraeli and his literary contemporaries produced at great speed. They were middle-aged when the Victorian novel came to maturity in the 1850s, the literary form that finds drama in the everyday. Theirs was thus the great age of fiction, when the novel made a romance of reality and turned ordinary men and women, living ordinary lives, into heroes and heroines.

Both were born storytellers. As an old lady resplendent in jewels and bright fabrics, Mary Anne pretended to have worked in her youth as a milliner or, in her more creative moments, as a barefooted factory girl. Disraeli, the sober-suited statesman, invented for himself an illustrious ancestry featuring an ancient family who escaped from Spain to Venice and then to England. Both were also keepers of stories. Mary Anne was a skilled and dedicated collector of documents, and the results of her impulse to collect and curate are visible today at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, where the Disraelis' papers are held. These papers constitute an archive of unparalleled richness, numbering over 50,000 separate items. The political sections of this archive have been extensively studied by scholars of Disraeli, but the 10,000 items relating specifically to Mary Anne have historically received little attention. Yet the archive in its entirety represents Mary Anne's great creative achievement. That we can recover so much of her and Disraeli's biographies is due to her efforts to catalogue the various chapters of their lives.

This book traces the intertwined story of Mr and Mrs Disraeli through their papers. My sense of their archive and the story it reveals has evolved over the course of several years of immersive reading in the Special Collections Reading Room at the Bodleian Library. These

years have been among the most stimulating of my professional life. They have also been the coldest, courtesy of the relocation of the Bodleian's manuscript holdings to a temporary reading room in a minimally heated and underinsulated 1950s basement. This relocation means that at the time of writing you have to be a hardy creature to work on a Bodleian manuscript in winter, or to be amongst the heroic Special Collections Reading Room staff.

The cold of the Special Collections Reading Room has opened up the Disraelis' history for me in unexpected ways. Their letters are full of references to being cold; to the way in which the cold confines the body and chills the mind. At Stowe House, while waiting to meet the Queen, they shiver in draughty halls and inadequate evening garb. At Osborne, the Queen's house on the Isle of Wight, he wears two greatcoats and a waistcoat as protection against the elements. Disraeli's father Isaac will not stir from his fireside in winter, even for the fresh air the doctor has ordered; his sister Sarah is compelled to cancel excursions to London when the east wind whistles through her hired carriage. Mary Anne's servants run back and forth from the House of Commons with warm clothes and boots to protect Disraeli from the chills of the debating chamber, until snow stops carriage wheels from turning and forces both master and mistress to stay inside.

Cold is also present in the Disraelis' papers in less physical ways. In 1792, the year of Mary Anne's birth, the steel of the guillotine glints for the first time in France and the French King, Louis XVI, is arrested, imprisoned and tried for his life. By the time of Disraeli's birth in 1804, Britain and France have been fighting for over a decade and war has become the sullen backdrop to the affairs of the nation. In this climate, free speech is not a luxury the government is prepared to afford its citizens, and political dissenters are spied on, arrested, and hounded out of their homes and their country by the rough justice of the mob.

Mary Anne is the daughter of a sailor; Disraeli is of Jewish descent. Yet for all the insecurity of their beginnings they become, over the course of their lives, able to shelter themselves from the cold, in both its physical and metaphorical manifestations.

The Disraelis' biographies are not the only narrative to emerge from their papers. Much of the reading I did over the course of my winters in the Bodleian was of letters written to Mary Anne by women who have disappeared from history. Taken together, the cases of these women point to the elements of the Disraelis' story that were at once universal and exceptional. They show how unusual Mary Anne was, as they reveal the vulnerability of those in her circle of acquaintance who were unmarried, widowed, or compelled to remain in unhappy households by convention and circumstance. Mary Anne understood the stories of less fortunate women as a counterpoint to her own and in that spirit they appear throughout this book, shadowing its central romance. Disraeli too derived his sense of self and his place in the world from paper. His shadows were not people he knew but Byron and Shelley, his literary forefathers. He was one of the last Romantics, shaped by the power of his own romance and the books he read.

Disraeli has, of course, been much written about by historians and biographers. Robert Blake's 1966 biography remains definitive, and has been joined in recent decades by a host of other works, including a rich study of Disraeli's early life by Jane Ridley and a provocative account of his sexuality by William Kuhn. Those who wish to trace the thinking of this most mercurial of men can do so through his letters, magnificently edited by the scholars of the Disraeli Project at Queen's University, Canada. Mary Anne has herself been the subject of two short biographies by

James Sykes and Mollie Hardwick, published in 1928 and 1972 respectively. Sykes wrote when myth still obscured Mary Anne's origins, and he concentrated his efforts on separating fact and fiction in her own retellings of her story. In *Mrs Dizzy*, Mollie Hardwick brought a novelist's eye to Mary Anne's history and collated many anecdotes relating to her conversational style, which was quite unlike that of her contemporaries.

When the Disraelis are read alongside each other, however, a different kind of story emerges. This is not a story only about politics, although its background is political; or a story only about a single unusual woman forging a place for herself alongside a prominent man. Disraeli's private papers point to the necessity of reading his life as biographers have in recent decades read those of unknown women, watching for alternative narratives, listening to things not said. In the case of both Disraelis this mode of reading charts a path through the fog of anecdote and offers the possibility of a portrait of a marriage unobscured by mythology.

That marriage was as surprising, eccentric and important as its hero and heroine. The Disraelis' story is about luck, and the path not taken, and the transformative effects of a good match for a man and woman of modest means in nineteenth-century Britain. It traces a journey from coldness to autumnal sunshine, and charts a marriage that wrote itself into happiness. It relates the history of people who remake themselves through their reading and writing, but also of people who disappear. And it is a story about what happens after the wedding, when the marriage plot is over.

Part One

At the Beginning

(1792–1839)

CHAPTER ONE

Storytelling

MARY ANNE

> *But you a very fairy, must*
> *Have had another birth,*
> *For never could the cold dull clay*
> *Have been your native earth.*
>
> *It must have been some charmed spot,*
> *From whence your being sprung,*
> *A lovely & a sunny place,*
> *Where still the World was young.*
>
> ('To Mrs Wyndham Lewis, with *The Book of Beauty*')

Mary Anne Disraeli was born on 11 November 1792 in the village of Brampford Speke in Devon. Brampford Speke was a small farming community four miles north of Exeter, with a church at its centre and an assortment of cottages and farmhouses scattered along the surrounding lanes. Mary Anne was the second child of John Evans, a naval seaman, and Eleanor Viney, a vicar's daughter. In later years she took pains to shroud her age and the date of her birth in mystery, prompting this poetic flight of fancy from an admirer. 'Childhood yet lingers at your head', 'To Mrs Wyndham Lewis' continued, 'so soon from most exiled. In ready kindness mirth & grace / You know you are a child.'[1]

The house in which Mary Anne grew up was the home of her Evans grandparents and was less the picturesque 'charmed spot' of her admirer's imagination than a noisy working farm. A pen-and-ink drawing of the house during the period of Mary Anne's childhood shows a white

thatched building with three tall chimneys standing in one corner of a square farmyard. Barns and outbuildings surround the other sides of the yard and the house itself is small – probably no more than seven or eight rooms – with little additional space for a young family. Anyone living there would have been intimately aware of the daily events of farm life as they unfolded outside the windows.

Mary Anne was brought up in this house by her mother and grandparents and never knew her father. From her parents' courtship letters, however, which she kept all her life, she learnt something of his character, and something too of the opposition her parents faced when they announced their intention to marry. Little is known of John Evans's background, but he was evidently not considered a suitable match for a young lady of Eleanor Viney's class. The Vineys were an old family of some standing, and Eleanor was related via her mother to several branches of the landed gentry, including the Lamberts, owners of Boyton Manor in Wiltshire since the sixteenth century, and the Scropes of Castle Combe, also in Wiltshire, who could trace their name and their ownership of Castle Combe back 500 years.

John Evans, in contrast, had no ancient lineage to bolster his prospects. 'It is true I cannot boast a long chain of distinguished forefathers', he told Eleanor when the objections of her family to their marriage appeared insurmountable. 'It will not be pleasant at a future day to hear you … reproached for having united yourself to a man that may be held in contempt by the rest of your family.'[2] Early in their courtship he also acknowledged that Eleanor had found him 'truly in the rough', but continued, 'it is your business to bend, burnish and shape me to whatever form will make you most happy and if you are not completely so 'twill be your own fault'.[3] John Evans was not remotely abashed by the social disparity between him and his bride.

If her family persisted in withholding Eleanor's dowry, then they would wait until they could support themselves on his pay, and she, meanwhile, should 'have more fortitude and a firmer reliance on her Lord & Master'.[4] Yet John was not merely a martinet. He combined firmness with passion and took a frank delight in the good things in life. Writing to Eleanor in 1786, two years before their marriage, he chided her for being a virtuously punctual early riser. 'Do you think you little Hussy I will allow you to be so regular when I am your acknowledged Master, do you imagine I will go to bed at 10 & rise by 7? – dont mistake me, I am grown quite a drone, beside it is in bed the moments fly.'[5]

Only John Evans's side of the courtship correspondence survives, so we have to infer Eleanor's responses to such statements from his letters. These suggest she was rather less sanguine about the future than he. 'Fear is the most destructive of all passions and will sooner overturn the Human powers than any other', he told her in January 1787.[6] Yet they also suggest that she had a will of her own, and that that will could be forcibly expressed. Their epistolary courtship was punctuated by quarrels prompted by a tension between her intuitive, emotional response to circumstance and his more practical stance. 'Dont believe', he told her at one point, 'that my composition is made up of Frigid materials. I certainly have as quick a sense of pain and consequently pleasure as you.'[7] By 1788, the couple had put aside their differences and won consent from the Vineys to their marriage. That consent was grudging. Eleanor received a smaller marriage settlement than her sister Bridget, who was married on the same day, and incurred the displeasure of a well-off aunt, Anne Viney, who appears in the courtship letters as one of the chief obstacles to the marriage. 'Your aunt is at present the only Barrier between us and Earthly happiness', wrote John exasperatedly at one point.[8]

Anne Viney contented herself with leaving her disobliging niece an annuity worth £1,000 less than that left to her more obedient sister, but by the time she died in 1800, John was beyond the reach of either her whims or her money. After their marriage in 1788, he and Eleanor made their home with his parents in Brampford Speke. Their son, another John, was born in 1790, and Mary Anne two years later. John Evans was frequently away with his ship, and in 1794, when Mary Anne was two, he died of a fever while serving in the West Indies. Although he was always an absent figure in the lives of his wife and children, his death nevertheless changed their lives, cutting them off from his naval world and depriving them of any prospect of a settled domestic life. It also confirmed Brampford Speke as his family's only refuge, and it was here that Mary Anne lived for her first fifteen years.

Mary Anne left no account of the years she spent in Brampford Speke, and documentary evidence for this period of her life is scarce. Only one undated letter survives to give us any indication of what her childhood was like, and that letter was written from the house of friends. Composed in a childish copperplate hand it reads, 'Our School is broke up and I am very comfortable with three pleasant companions, with whom and my Brother I shall spent the holidays very agreeable. he unite with me, in duty to you, and all friends, and in wishing they may enjoy the pleasures of the season. I am my dear Mama your dutiful Daughter Mary Anne Evans.'[9]

This missive is a little more revealing than its innocuous content might initially suggest. From its subject if not from its erratic grammar it is clear that Mary Anne received an education of sorts, although it is more likely to have been from a governess shared with another family rather than from a school as we would understand it.fn1 Eleanor Viney was more than capable of teaching her own children to

read and write, so given her straitened circumstances it is noteworthy that she sent her daughter away to obtain the accomplishments of a young lady. It is possible that the cramped farm at Brampford Speke was not quite the sanctuary for Eleanor's growing children that it was for Eleanor herself, since Mary Anne and her brother evidently remained with their friends even when 'school' broke up, rather than return home.

In 1807, Mary Anne's grandparents died and Eleanor had to leave Brampford Speke. She moved to Cathedral House in Gloucester, which had been in the Viney family for many years. In 1807 Cathedral House was in the possession of Eleanor's brother James Viney, although it is not clear whether he was actually in residence when his sister and her children lived there.

James Viney was an officer in the Royal Artillery, and in 1808 he joined Wellington's army in the Spanish peninsula. He commanded regiments at the key Napoleonic battles of Roliça, Vimiera and Corunna, and by 1834 had become Major General Sir James Viney, having been given a knighthood and made Companion of the Bath in recognition of his military service. Mary Anne was fond of her uncle and he of her, although he could be irascible and appears from his letters to have been something of a rake, who fathered at least two illegitimate sons and was full of hare-brained money-making schemes. His nephew John (Mary Anne's older brother) was inspired by his example to volunteer for the army, and followed him to the Peninsula. John too fought at Roliça and Vimiera, and was quickly promoted first to ensign and then to lieutenant. His promotions were obtained through purchase, as was normal practice at the time. At the Battle of Talavera in 1809, he distinguished himself by capturing a French standard, and he also took part in the Siege of Badajoz in 1812.

Mary Anne did her utmost to shield her mother from the dangers John faced, although this cannot have been easy as they followed his progress up the Spanish Peninsula in letters, newspapers and army gazettes. John's absence affected the lives of Eleanor and Mary Anne in practical ways too. Eleanor's husband, parents and parents-in-law were dead, her brother and her son were away fighting, and she and her daughter had not only to fend for themselves but also to find the money to pay for John's promotions. Perhaps motivated by these practical concerns, in 1808 she remarried. Her new husband was one Thomas Yate, a lieutenant in the Worcestershire Militia. Yate joined in 1796 as a surgeon's mate, a position that required only the most rudimentary medical training.[10] In the 1790s he served with the Militia in Ireland, where Britain retained a defensive military presence right through the Napoleonic wars, but he was never engaged in battle. The Militia was based in Exeter in 1805–6, which is probably when he met Eleanor, but by the time of their marriage in 1808 it had moved to Portsmouth, and it is likely that it was there that he, Eleanor and Mary Anne made their first home.

Thomas Yate has traditionally been dismissed by biographers of the Disraelis as a shadowy, unsatisfactory figure. His letters, however, suggest that he was an attentive husband and a dutiful stepfather who immersed himself in the affairs of his adopted family and did his best to help them. Mary Anne always wrote of him kindly and conspired with him to defend her mother from unpleasantness whenever possible. He worked hard to disentangle the tortuous financial arrangements between Eleanor and her brother James, in which mortgages were transferred and loans made and recalled with dizzying frequency. The family lived on income from his naval stocks and on the slender rents deriving from property inherited

by Eleanor. Attempts to increase the value of these funds seem to have taken up much of Yate's time.

Eleanor's marriage resulted in more upheavals for her daughter, as the family followed the Worcestershire Militia first to Portsmouth and then in 1814 to Bristol, where they moved between a series of rented houses. It was an uncertain, peripatetic existence, in which relocation from house to house was driven by necessity as the family's small income rose and fell. Eleanor wrote to her son that she was relieved to be out of Portsmouth and settled in Bristol since 'this Place is more reasonable than Ports which is necessary as by the Peace with France Mr Yate loses the best part of his Income':[11] a loss of income attributable to the diminution of the value of naval stocks following the Battle of Waterloo, and the accompanying reduction in the salaries of reservists like Yate. The move to Bristol suited Mary Anne. Eleanor reported that she found the society 'very preferable to Portsmouth', and that she enjoyed meeting people of her own age.[12]

It is hard to get a sense of the daily rhythms of Mary Anne's life at this stage, since in later life she richly embroidered accounts of her youth. She told Sir Stafford Northcote and others that she had been a milliner's apprentice[13] and her friend Mrs Duncan Stewart that she had worked as a factory girl and walked barefoot to work every morning before being rescued by her first husband, who in this account fell in love with her in all her ragged glory.[14] Neither story had any basis in fact. The family's resources were not so stretched as to render it necessary for Eleanor Viney's daughter to work for her living, and the documentary evidence that does survive suggests instead a life filled with social visits and some dutiful voluntary work at a local Sunday school. Her closest friends during this period were the Clutton sisters – Elizabeth, Barbara, Dolly and Frances – who lived at Pensax in Worcestershire. Their

father Thomas Clutton served throughout the 1790s in the Militia with Thomas Yate, and it was probably in 1805–6, when the Militia was based in Exeter and Eleanor and the children were living in Brampford Speke, that the two families met. By 1808 Thomas Clutton had died and his widow and daughters had moved to Pensax, where both Mary Anne and Eleanor were frequent visitors. In the 1860s Dolly wrote to Mary Anne of her memories of 'our early love – and wanderings up to our knees in snow & dirt at Pensas'. The two women kept up their correspondence until Dolly's death, and her children subsequently described Mary Anne as their mother's oldest friend.[15]

Mary Anne may not have experienced the life of a factory drudge that she later recounted, but nor was her youth untouched by suffering. In 1812, when she was twenty, Thomas Yate's brother committed suicide, apparently fearing the prospect of a court martial. Richard Yate had followed his brother into the Worcestershire Militia in 1799, but he resigned his commission to join the regular army and served in the Peninsula between 1808 and 1812. By the winter of 1812 he had returned with his regiment to barracks at Kingsbridge in Devon and his suicide note suggests he believed he was about to be discovered in some regimental accounting irregularity. The note, rambling in its desperation, also reveals something of the toll the Peninsula War took on men like Richard Yate, James Viney and John Evans, who spent years away from home as the British army, under the command of the Duke of Wellington, pushed Napoleon's forces back through Portugal and Spain into France. In the military communities in which Mary Anne grew up, the absence of these men and the changes wrought in them by war were particularly evident. 'I must say', Richard Yate wrote with some understatement, 'it is truly unfortunate after having stopped for war four years … to suffer by my own hand at

last.' 'I beg', he continued, in a note addressed to Thomas Yate, 'you will not nor any of my relations allow yourselves to be too much affected at my determination.'[16]

Given the circumstances of Richard Yate's death, it is hard to see how this wish could have been fulfilled. The local newspaper gave graphic details about how he managed to shoot himself with a musket, leaning the gun against a wall and forcing the trigger with his sword. The press reports made no mention of accusations of fraud or a looming court martial, although whether out of ignorance, respect for a serving officer, or because the accusations and court martial were figments of Yate's troubled mind is not clear. 'The deceased', ran one report, 'had lately returned with his regiment from the Peninsula, and it appearing on evidence that he had for some time past displayed symptoms of a disordered mind, the jury without hesitation returned a verdict of *Lunacy*.'[17]

Even without the rumours of dishonourable behaviour hinted at in Richard Yate's explanation for his actions, no young woman of marriageable age would have wanted to be associated with a story of suicide (still an illegal act) and insanity. The family's move in 1814 from Portsmouth to Bristol may therefore have been well timed, allowing Mary Anne, now twenty-two and beyond her girlhood, to disentangle herself from a claustrophobic network of military families and establish herself in society untainted by any whiff of scandal. Marriage offered an obvious way out of a financially precarious home life, and what Mary Anne lacked in a dowry she made up for with looks and vivacity. She was a petite beautiful flirt with a mass of kiss-curls: admirers sent paeans in praise of her tiny feet and young men wrote mournfully that she was insensible to the anxiety her teasing induced in them. Her brother John described her as 'cold' and her heart as 'particular'. She was evidently not prepared to accept a husband who made

no attempt at romance.[18] Candidates for her hand were required to hymn their devotion to her in poetry, some of which Disraeli discovered and copied into her commonplace book decades later. One Henry Harrison went so far as to ask Eleanor for permission to marry her and wrote at great length on how his feelings for her transcended his desire to obey his mother, who 'has always declared it her wish to have her sons affection prudently settled when young'. He also referred to a quarrel with Mary Anne but noted reassuringly that 'it has frequently been the case with me, after any little difference with my sister, that we were afterwards if possible more cordial than ever' – hardly the sentiments to secure the heart of a romantically inclined young lady.[19]

By 1815, Henry Harrison and his fellow admirers were facing competition of a serious nature. Wyndham Lewis was the son of an ancient Welsh family and a major shareholder in the Dowlais Iron Works near Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales. Wyndham inherited his shares in Dowlais from one of its founders, his grandfather Thomas Lewis, and by 1815 was running the ironworks in partnership with the other major shareholder, John Guest. Wyndham never involved himself in the day-to-day management as Guest did, partly because Guest was the real genius behind the works' dramatic expansion, and partly because his business interests also encompassed banking, the development of the railways and the law. From a maternal uncle he inherited the estate of Greenmeadow outside Cardiff, and a conservative estimate of his income puts it at around £11,000 a year.

Money meant that Wyndham ranked highly on an Austenian scale of eligibility. In *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, Mrs Bennet is desperate for one of her daughters to marry Mr Darcy for his £10,000 a year, and her family is much more well-to-do than was Mary Anne's.

Wyndham was not, however, quite the Mr Darcy to Henry Harrison's Mr Collins that his wealth alone suggests. He was fourteen years older than Mary Anne, a distinctly unromantic thirty-six when they met. His income came from trade: it was a brilliant marriage for Mary Anne in material terms, but it did not elevate her to the aristocracy or even the 'Upper 10,000' who made up smart London society. And Wyndham had a past, in the form of an illegitimate daughter called Frances to whom he left an annuity of £60 a year and of whose existence Mary Anne was aware. His temperament was also utterly different from that of his putative bride. He was a serious, thoughtful man, not given to acting rashly, and despite his circumstances he was notoriously tight-fisted. At one stage he even went to the lengths of hiring the morning newspapers rather than buying them. But he was as captivated by Mary Anne's good looks and rapid conversational style as the earnest young men who had previously attempted to woo her. Mary Anne was looking for someone to sweep her off her feet, and Wyndham rose to the challenge. He wrote page after page of dubious poetry in which he praised her beauty, her eyes and, rather more dampeningly, her virtue and her modesty. She was his 'beauteous charmer', his 'lovely girl', his 'bright maid'. 'Where is Wyndham's joy, if Mar'ann flies?' The unknowing world might cry 'See there the maid with bosom cold! / Indifference o'er her heart presides, / And love & lovers she derides', yet he, her true love, knew of the 'grateful tumult' hidden behind her capricious exterior.[20]

The poetry suggests that Wyndham, aware of Mary Anne's reputation but entranced by her beauty, thought that he could mould her into the virtuous wife he wanted, even as she did her best to persuade him to adopt the persona of the ardent lover. It may have been an affair of the heart for him, in which concerns about lineage, money

and flightiness were put to one side, but for her it was firmly an affair of the head, in which romance did not arise spontaneously but had to be invented to fill an emotional vacuum. Her brother John, camped with his regiment outside Paris after the fall of Napoleon, was beside himself with delight at the fact that his wilful sister had made such a strategic choice. Reacting to her 'kindly' description of Wyndham, he noted approvingly, 'you do not speak like a blind lover'. 'You mention', he continued, 'that Mr Lewis's family are very good on both sides.'[21]

Some sense of the courtship of this oddly matched couple can be gleaned from the letters Wyndham wrote to Mary Anne during their engagement. His bulletins were formal, full of detailed accounts of his travels and his business affairs. Mary Anne evidently required more than the muted expressions of affection he offered. 'If you co'd see into my heart you wo'd be assured that you have no cause to entertain the slightest doubt of the unshakable Love of your most affectionate Wyndham Lewis', ended one letter.[22] Another mourned a look of 'scornful anger' directed towards him. 'That I love you truly most truly I call Heavn' to witness & I never can place my affections on another.'[23] Wyndham evidently needed Mary Anne's love and missed her company when parted from her, but he was also wary of her moods and what he perceived to be a levity so excessive as to border on the hysterical. In one undated letter he tried to explain that his devotion to her was unswerving but that it was tested by her behaviour. 'You certainly have a most amiable and virtuous heart oh that you wo'd always consult its dictates when you seem overwhelm'd by an excessive flow of spirits – if you knew how bewitching you were in your softer moods you would never give way to any rhapsodies.'[24]

Like her mother, Mary Anne married a calm, phlegmatic man, who, like her father, was simultaneously entranced

and disturbed by his intended's passions. Wyndham's letters evoke a bride who was highly strung and easily provoked to jealousy, but who was also full of energy and determined to find excitement in a match made for material gain. They suggest a groom devoted to his beloved in her moments of quietness, made anxious by her whims and outbursts. It was not, perhaps, the most secure foundation for a life together, but many of their contemporaries made marriages that were even less well suited. In the end, anxieties and jealousies were put aside, and Mary Anne Evans became Mary Anne Lewis on 22 December 1815.

Benjamin Disraeli was born on 21 December 1804, twelve years after Mary Anne. In the memoir of his father he published in 1849, he claimed to be descended from Venetian ancestors who assumed the name D'Israeli 'in order that their race might be for ever recognised'.[25] The truth was rather less romantic. Disraeli's grandfather came from Ferrara in Italy, arriving in England in 1748. The family papers suggest that all Disraeli's efforts to establish the nobility of his lineage failed to find any genealogical line beyond his great-grandfather, but it was crucial to his conception of himself to be part of an ancient Jewish aristocracy quite as grand as the English aristocracy whose traditions he assumed. His mother's family, the Basevis, were in fact more distinguished than the Disraelis and could be traced back to 1492, but Disraeli was never remotely interested in his maternal ancestry. It was his name that mattered to him, along with the sense that he was fulfilling his destiny as the son of a noble line. In adulthood he dropped the apostrophe from his name while his parents retained it. They were always 'of Israel': he was simply Disraeli.