



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Romantic Dialectics: Culture, Gender, Theater: Essays in Honor of Lilla Maria Crisafulli* ed. by Serena Baiesi and Stuart Curran (review)

Alan Rawes

Keats-Shelley Journal, Volume 69, 2020, pp. 177-180 (Article)

Published by Keats-Shelley Association of America, Inc.

Keats-Shelley  
Journal  
VOLUME LXIX 2020

FOUNDED BY  
THE KEATS-SHELLEY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC.

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/835575>

links Wollstonecraft's evolving relationship to the tropes of sentimental fiction between 1792 and her death in 1797 to the network of Minerva authors who drew on them, while simultaneously exploring how that network integrated and synthesized Wollstonecraft's philosophy. The second section places Minerva Press novels from its zenith period at the intersection of debates about the value of rank that followed the French Revolution. During this period of the Press's production, providential plots, in which young and virtuous commoners are revealed to be secretly noble, proved popular and were often used to counterrevolutionary ends. According to Neiman, Godwin, unlike Wollstonecraft, recognized the revolutionary potential of drawing on conventional feelings; Neiman reads *Caleb Williams* as an anti-providential novel that uses the tropes of the providential novel to create sympathy for lower-class characters and question the value of rank. In the third and final section, Neiman turns to Minerva authors' use of the gothic during the decline of the Press, presenting it as a self-conscious act of collective authorship and linking this model to, on the one hand, Shelley's poetics of commonly shared feelings and, on the other, the abolitionist and feminist arguments deployed in the anonymous 1808 novel *The Woman of Colour*.

*Minerva's Gothics* effectively integrates a range of methodologies, using distant reading strategies to pinpoint and justify its classifications and case studies. The innovative methodology of the first chapter, in particular, offers an insightful and necessary corrective to previous models, which have studied publishing trends by decade. However, the dominant tropes of each period of production are less convincingly established, at times relying on fuzzy distinctions to establish which novelists who published with the Press do and do not count as Minerva authors. While Neiman's analysis of the tropes central to each period of the Minerva Press is ultimately convincing, it would be strengthened by the kind of quantitative analysis that she uses to justify the different periods of the Press's production—that is, by providing hard numbers for how many works in each period made use of each trope. Given the overall achievements of this book, though, this is a minor quibble easily overshadowed by a thorough analysis that celebrates the richness of Minerva novels, acknowledging their frequent absurdity while nevertheless taking seriously the authors and readers who engaged with them.

Simon Fraser University

KANDICE SHARREN

*Romantic Dialectics: Culture, Gender, Theater: Essays in Honor of Lilla Maria Crisafulli*. Edited by SERENA BAIESI and STUART CURRAN. Bern: Peter Lang, 2018. Pp. 252. Paper, \$78.95.

This excellent volume of thirteen essays, by scholars from Italy, Malta, the UK, and the US, celebrates the long and pioneering career of one of Italy's most internationally prominent scholars of Romanticism, Lilla Maria Crisafulli

of the University of Bologna. It does so by offering a “reflection and a refraction of concerns that have attracted her intellectual advocacy and scholarship over many decades” and is divided into three sections reflecting the “fields of research and teaching that Crisafulli has covered in recent years” (p. 11): “Cultural Dialectics,” “Dialectics of Gender,” and “Dialectical Theatrical Modes.” A foreword by Keir Elam and the editors’ introduction give the reader a useful overview of Crisafulli’s ground-breaking work in each of these areas as well as of the aims of the book, which seeks to show how recent work in the field of British Romantic studies by scholars from a wide range of different national and critical traditions is “united . . . by a shared dialectical engagement in generating and debating new approaches” to that field (p. 14).

“Cultural Dialectics” opens with Stuart Curran’s “Byron and Shelley: Becoming Italian.” Curran’s argument—which perhaps underestimates Byron’s engagement with (potential) Italian readers but rightly praises him as a translator of Italian—is that though Byron “wholly immersed himself in his Italian milieu, his late work remains deeply indebted to and focused” on England; by contrast, Percy Bysshe Shelley, “who largely lived within an expatriate British community in Italy, internalized, it appears almost instinctively, the literature and language enveloping him, building a pliant bridge in his poetry between English and Italian cultures” (p. 31). In “‘I will Teach [. . .] the Stones / To Rise Against Earth’s Tyrants’: Moving Beyond War in Byron’s ‘War Cantos,’” Jeffrey N. Cox persuasively argues that these *Don Juan* cantos “go beyond the immediate debates over Waterloo or Wellington to provide a more global condemnation of the ravages that wars waged by tyrants bring upon the people and to proclaim a future without tyranny that we might think of as more Shelleyan than Byronic” (p. 40). Peter Vassallo’s survey of “Romantic Fabrications of Napoleon” offers a concise introduction to the Napoleon Buonapartes of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Byron, Shelley, and Romantic-period British caricaturists, especially James Gillray. Vassallo clearly demonstrates some of the key ways in which Romantic writers and artists were “obsessed” with Napoleon, “who became crucial to their political concerns and to their own roles in society” (p. 60).

Elena Spandri’s “Between Culture Shock and Franciscan Ecology: Wordsworth’s Last Encounter with Italy” turns to Wordsworth’s poems about his last journey to Italy in 1837. Spandri uncovers an intriguing later Wordsworth for whom Italy’s “religious roots, epitomized by Franciscanism, interrogated the Italian struggle for independence” and “Britain’s mid-century national discourse” by “intimat[ing]” “a ‘different’ Christianity” and “an environmental ethics . . . that concerned all locales and transcended national boundaries” (p. 77). Nora Crook’s “‘That Crabbed German’: Mary Shelley’s Germanizing” addresses the question of how Mary Shelley came “to start learning German in her mid forties” (p. 86). Crook builds a compelling answer based on Shelley’s relationship with Thomas and Jane Carlyle, her recognition of Percy Shel-

ley's "growing in stature and reputation in Germany" in the 1830s (p. 90), her two journeys to Germany in the 1840s, and a new-found interest in "the novels of Ida, Countess Hahn-Hahn (1805–80)" after 1844 (p. 91). Greg Kucich closes the "Cultural Dialectics" section with "The Place of Keats's *Endymion* in Times of Peril and among 'Blear-Eyed Nations.'" Kucich convincingly argues for a coherent patterning of the poem's "labyrinthine" (p. 100) structure at the level of its "ways of knowing and seeing" post-Napoleonic Europe (p. 113). This he sees in Keats's embracing of the "doubling consciousness" (p. 113) of a "dark Huntian view" of contemporary "continental and English" (p. 111) politics coupled with Leigh Hunt's optimism about "possible change, even transformation of the bleak political state of things" (p. 112).

Gioia Angeletti opens "Dialectics of Gender" with "Outside the Love of Men: The Ladies of Llangollen, Anna Seward, and Female Friendship." Angeletti offers a powerful reading of Seward's *Llangollen Vale* (1796) as celebrating the famous "Ladies of Llangollen" both as "archetypes of Romantic [female] friendship" (p. 130), with its "human values" (p. 129), and as "national rebels"—part of "Welsh resistance to English ... power" (p. 130). Carlotta Farese follows with "Reading for Agency: The Literary *Bildung* of Fanny Price," deftly arguing that what enables Price to "obtain what she wants—Edmund's love" (p. 143), is reading. Farese's central example is the *Lovers' Vows* episode, which offers Fanny an "almost Machiavellian ... insight into the real structures of Georgian patriarchy" and teaches her that "reticence and dissimulation" rather than "constant ... sincerity" (p. 143) are the ways to "beat patriarchal authority at its own game" (p. 148). Serena Baiesi's "'I will Tell my Story, and my Reader shall Judge for Me': Mary Shelley's Stories for *The Keepsake*" discusses Shelley's contributions to fashionable annuals as one of the "very first attempts to develop the short story" (p. 156). Especially interesting is Shelley's invention of "a new form"—"the sketch"—incorporating "multiple narratives and points of view" (p. 162) through which women speak from their own perspectives and stand "for female empowerment facing tyrannical male power" (p. 162).

The collection's final section, "Dialectical Theatrical Modes," begins with Catherine Burroughs's "Women and Closet Drama." Burroughs insightfully uncovers the creative, educative, political, and cultural dimensions of "'taboo' topics such as incest, abolition, and sexual desire" (p. 167) explored in a range of closet dramas written by women during the Romantic period, alongside the "educational" opportunities that the genre offered women for "learning, rehearsing, reflection, and re-reading" (p. 176) in both private and social female spaces, away from "censorship" or "public taint" (p. 176). Michael Gamer's cogent "'And the Explosion Immediately Takes Place': Romantic Tragedy and the End(s) of Melodrama" focuses on how the "rise of a new theatrical genre—melodrama—helped revive tragedy during the Regency" (p. 185). Discussing melodrama between 1793 and 1823, and drawing on Coleridge's notion of dramatic "situations" (pp. 189–90), Gamer shows that a late melodrama such as Rich-

ard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption* (1823) reveals how "audiences' twin demands for sensation and realism ... finally tore tragedy from its Shakespearean thrall" (p. 199). In "Translating Spaces: The Case of *Paul and Virginia*," Franca Dellarosa considers Helen Maria Williams's 1795 translation and James Cobb's 1800 dramatization of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) as "wholly dissimilar" (p. 203) British appropriations of a "European bestseller" (p. 204). In particular, the essay nicely draws out the radical difference between the feminizing effects of Williams's "intervening" paratext, especially the "additional sonnets" she gives to "Virginia's outcast mother" (pp. 206–7), and Cobb's "domesticat[ing]," "imperial" relocation of Saint-Pierre's story to the West Indies, a "recognizably *British* colonial background" (p. 207). This section of the volume closes with "Staging Strangeness in Charles Robert Maturin's *Bertram*" by Diego Saglia. Here Maturin's play is "a mixture of tragedy and melodrama" (p. 222) that, as Saglia skillfully demonstrates, combines "relentlessly constructing forms of strangeness"—"ranging from the other and the alien to the monstrous, the uncanny, and the hybrid" (p. 220)—with the "recognizable ... stock in trade of a Romantic-period acting style" (p. 227)—that of Edmund Kean—to produce an inextricably textual *and* theatrical "figuration of the repressed" and its "destructive power" (p. 225).

This volume is very well put together: it helpfully gathers its essays around three distinct kinds of dialectic but in ways that promote conversations both within and between those different dialectic fields. Its variety showcases the diversity that can be bought together by a commitment to engaging with the dialectics deeply embedded within Romantic-period culture. It is a fitting tribute to Professor Crisafulli.

University of Manchester

ALAN RAWES

*Romantic Vacancy: The Poetics of Gender, Affect, and Radical Speculation.* By KATE SINGER. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. Pp. xlii, 233. Cloth, \$95.00; Paper, \$32.95.

Kate Singer's *Romantic Vacancy* is an illuminating and much-needed study that breaks away from prevailing notions regarding gender and sensibility in the Romantic period as well as the unhelpful impasse between deconstruction and new historicism that continues to plague Romantic-era scholarship today. As Singer reminds us, our understanding of the influence of sensibility on the works of Romantic poets, particularly women, has been blinkered by an overemphasis on sensibility as a medical discourse and the segregation of Romantic women writers in literary studies as the unfortunate result of Anne K. Mellor's still influential "separate yet equal" argument regarding masculine and feminine Romanticisms. *Romantic Vacancy* addresses these concerning trends by demonstrating the ways in which Romantic women poets such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, and Maria Jane Jewsbury explored the idea of