

Ed. Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson, *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*. Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 2008. Pp. 336. £65. ISBN 9780853235897.

The latest offering to Byron studies aims 'to expand but also to critique' our understanding of the title subject. It achieves this from the start with Bernard Beatty's lively introduction to the collection. It perhaps goes even further than it initially intended by encouraging a new approach to Byron studies. The volume is appropriately titled: *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron* gestures towards a new direction in Byron scholarship. In a very Byronic move, the sense in which this volume is 'making it new' begins 'with the beginning' (*DJ* I.7.50) when Beatty clearly outlines the potential of thematic studies of Byron to incorporate a vast range of scholarship and varying critical approaches. The editorial panel have selected essays that demonstrate the topic under discussion. The topic of 'Liberty' and 'Poetic Licence' is markedly apt; not only because it speaks to our current intellectual climate, as demonstrated by the recent *Taking Liberties* exhibition at the British Library, but because, as Beatty rightly asserts, 'Byron is the poet of liberty'.

The collection sustains attention to the better known titles in Byron's *oeuvre* - *Childe Harold* is here, as is *Don Juan* - but also reminds us of the importance of lesser known material such as the overlooked *juvenilia* and some of the later works; *The Island* in particular receives an uncharacteristically fair share of attention in several essays. This approach to the primary material is echoed in the volume's evident engagement with previous scholarship; that references to Jerome McGann come a close second to references to Byron himself, does not limit the sense in which the volume is pushing critical scholarship in new directions. Contributors also demonstrate an engagement with more radical scholarship, such as Judith Butler and Camille Paglia. That the contributors offer new readings of the texts is equally true of both household names and relative newcomers, notable in two differing readings of Byron's *Cain*: whilst Joan Blythe ('Byron, Milton, and Doctrines of Christian Liberty') opens up possibilities for new readings of the figure of Abel, both theological and literary, Ralph O'Connor ('Byron's Afterlife and the Emancipation of Geology') reads the poem as containing 'a coherent scientific agenda' which, he argues, contributed to the use of geology as a weapon against the church.

The most heartening strength of the volume is that the subject matter enables the co-existence of attention to Byron's poetry and his life. The limits of autobiographical criticism are noted by Jonathon Shears ('Aesthetic Dialectic in *Sardanapalus*) who rightly indicates that this approach leaves textual questions unanswered for many years. Shears is supported by fellow contributor Tom Mole ('The Regime of Visibility and the Possibility of Resistance') who illustrates the dangers of over-emphasizing the connection between biographical conjecture and poetic production which can lead to the marginalization of texts such as *The Bride of Abydos*, the unfair neglect of which Mole's essay begins to rectify. Timothy Webb's 'Byron and The Politics of Publication' exemplifies the potency of selective and informative biographical examples; the essay serves as both an effective coda and also an illuminating piece in its own right.

The weaker essays in the collection adhere to the precedent of placing Byron's life above his work which leads to conjectures of questionable value. Whether or not, for example, Byron fancied Napoleon, as considered by John Clubbe ('Byron, Napoleon, and Imaginative Freedom') and Jonathan Gross ('Byron and Staël on Liberty'), provides limited benefit to an approach to the poetry. Whilst biographical contexts should not be overlooked, Michael O'Neill's close attention to the brilliance of the poetry itself ('Freedom and Fatality in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos III and IV') causes us to ask why this sort of approach is so often denied Byron's work? Such neglect is arguably why the merits of Byron's poetry are so often called into question: there is not enough of this type of

essay in Byron studies though, as this volume demonstrates, it's something that a thematic approach encourages.

Tony Howe ('Byron, Johnson, and the Bowles Controversy') and Gavin Hopps ('Byron and Grammatical Freedom') demonstrate the possibilities in historically informed close-readings of Byron's poetry. The former challenges categorizing Byron's work as either Augustan or Romantic, freeing modern criticism from long-held assumptions and providing a nuanced expansion of the argument to stanzas from *Don Juan's* 'Dedication'. Hopps traces some very important parallels between Byron's tendency for grammatical errors and his major influences; there is an implicit suggestion that in sharing such 'errors' with Spenser, Shakespeare and Pope, Byron could be keeping worse company. The collection is also striking in the level of attention it gives to the subject of influence which in itself poses questions regarding the extent of Byron's creative liberty or independence. The usual suspects are present - Shelley; Shakespeare and Pope - alongside some less usual candidates such as Dr Johnson who Tony Howe persuasively considers Byron's reading of and Stauffer's consideration of a new source for the Haidee Cantos of *Don Juan*.

By the very nature of approaching Byron through a theme so clearly central to both his poetry and life the volume achieves its first aim of working as a whole. It is also evident that a careful balance has been struck (as close to 50-50 as you could get) between household names and younger scholars. It is also clear that a bias towards either side of the pond has been avoided. The light-handedness of the editorial panel should also be noted: Charles E. Robinson has held back from contributing an essay and Beatty's illuminating introduction is of a modest length. The editors prudently indicate that the collection is intended as the start of a wide topic and one that will undoubtedly be taken up by scholars in the future. My biggest reservation about this collection is a distinct lack of female scholars. It is heartening to see Kernberger and Blythe numbering among the easily recognizable contributors to the volume, though some notables are absent, most obviously: Jane Stabler, Caroline Franklin and Susan Wolfson. What is more concerning is the complete lack of any lesser-known female Byronists. I would very much doubt that this is merely an oversight on the part of such a competent panel of editors. If, then, this is reflective of a general dearth then sadly this augurs very ill for the future of Byron studies.

It would be unfair, however, to end on such a critical note. The volume achieves what it has set out to do and more by inviting a reconsideration of how we approach Byron. This invitation is not only extended by the volume as a whole but backed up by each individual essay which calls for further contribution and extended dialogue. The most notable achievement of the collection is the way in which it simultaneously builds upon past scholarship whilst offering a platform for future Byron scholarship.