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Poetry and Popular Protest: Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy (Book Review)

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Reviews

JOHN GARDNER, *Poetry and Popular Protest: Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. xix + 272. £50.00 hardback. 9780230280717.

A recent conference, 'Was There a Literary Regency? A Symposium', was held at Fordham University in New York City, 14 May 2011; it explored some of the literary and cultural issues at the centre of John Gardner's well-researched and clearly written monograph. Gardner's book makes some of the points made by symposium participants: one must look at both elite and popular texts, and at both literary and visual texts, in order to integrate meaningfully the extensive interconnections between the aesthetic and the political realms. Gardner would have been a welcome addition to the conference, which also would have greatly benefited from his insightful study. The coincidence of the conference and the book suggests several things: that the Regency is becoming at least as appealing to scholars of the Romantic era as the 1790s has been, and that certain theoretical assumptions about Romanticism, both 'high' and 'low', are nearing consensus levels of agreement. Gardner's book has some notably innovative readings, but for the most part his commentary is within what is now familiar critical territory.

I will summarise the book's contents briefly and then make a few comments about the 'new' Regency.

Gardner's introduction, 'The Radical Ladder', alludes to one of George Cruikshank's images of that name in 1820. The intricate symbolism of the whole image entails a linking together of Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline controversy, thus visually concretising a central argument that Gardner makes: the three political events are interrelated with

one another and with the poetry they inspired. Departing from a mechanistic Marxism, which would have literature merely reflect socio-political reality, Gardner shows that poetry and texts of all kinds, including popular prints and radical doggerel, helped shape events as well. The political conflicts seemed to inspire the poets because, as Gardner points out, more verse was published between 1819 and 1821 than in any other period during 1814–35 (4). Moreover, 'the gulf that separated "high" literature from the literature of the streets shrank' and sometimes 'disappeared' (10). Charles Lamb wrote in favour of the Cato Street rebels, Byron symbolically represented the political conflicts in *Marino Faliero*, Percy Shelley in *Mask of Anarchy* and *Swellfoot the Tyrant* became a 'broadside balladeer' (7), and most characteristically William Hone worked on both sides of the cultural divide, producing some of the most popular radical works while at the same time publishing work of a more elite nature, such as William Hazlitt's essays and his own parody of Byron's *Don Juan*.

Between the introduction and the conclusion are three parts, and each part is organised around one of the three political events of 1819–21: Peterloo, the Cato Street Conspiracy, and the Queen Caroline controversy. That the political events have priority over the writers indicates just how far Gardner has departed from author-centred models of literary criticism.

Peterloo, or the Manchester Massacre of 16 August 1819, was the 'bloodiest political event' of the nineteenth century on English soil (17). Gardner focuses on three different literary responses, that by Samuel Bamford (an eyewitness to the event), Percy Shelley (who read about it in Italy), and William Hone (already a popular radical publisher from his 1817

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trials for blasphemy). The Bamford chapter emphasises the poet's retreating radicalism as time went on, as he tried to cover up the true extent of his political rebellion, including his eight different imprisonments (23). Bamford's influential Peterloo verse attacked the magistrate Hay and drew upon Milton's *Areopagitica* for the image of a 'noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks' (30). Gardner remarks that Milton's image circulated beyond Bamford, appearing in Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy* as well, and this is a good example of the mixing of high and low literary cultures. The third chapter on William Hone is perhaps the highlight of the book, for Hone fits Gardner's overall thesis perfectly. First, the popularity of the Hone-Cruikshank satires was nothing short of spectacular, the satire responding to Peterloo went through fifty-two editions by March 1820 (48). Integrating generously the prior commentary on Hone, Gardner usefully delineates the various literary influences on this neglected writer – Skelton, Hogarth, Butler's *Hudibras*, and even Pope. The latter suggestion is persuasive as the *Dunciad* has a rich allusiveness known to the text's first readers just as Hone's satires possess. Gardner's point that the satires fuse the *Dunciad* with the chapbook culture is well taken (57). Another excellent idea is that the Hone-Cruikshank prints were radical not just in content but in their reconfiguring of the reading public. At the same time Coleridge was arguing vehemently for the separation of reading publics in an attempt to preserve the elite nature of a 'high' Romanticism (70). (Coleridge of course was not a little inconsistent in his protests against a popular literature, as he himself wrote ballads and in the Gothic mode, but that is another kind of interpretive project.)

The chapter on Shelley has a good reading the *Mask of Anarchy*, establishing for example that what 'revolution' meant in late 1819 was that if a section of the army went over to the reformers out of class loyalty (89). Shelley's poem is accordingly truly revolutionary, not 'reformist', given the political forces at work at the time (91). Gardner also points out that there was widespread sympathy for the victims of Peterloo, even in the establishment press (86), so that the rhetorical task for radical writers was not so much creating sympathy as using it.

The second part, on the Cato Street Conspiracy, advances our knowledge of the event and the literature about it, but it also raises some questions. If it was a

government-inspired plot to overthrow the government, as it seems to have been, it is not clear why it would be an 'embarrassment' to radicals and reformists (119). Shelley, Hone, and Hazlitt ignored the attempted coup by Spencean radicals, but Charles Lamb wrote on it directly and Byron indirectly, as did – not mentioned by Gardner – John Thelwall (in *The Champion*). Byron's friend John Hobhouse had apparently some connection with the conspirators, as did Cobbett. *Marino Faliero* is Byron's attempt to understand what might have motivated Hobhouse if indeed he were involved with the Spenceans. It would be interesting if any information to shed light on these mysteries still exists in the Public Records Office at Kew, but I would think the historians have scoured the files thoroughly by now, so that we are left with uncertainty.

About the Queen Caroline controversy there is much less mystery, as much – perhaps too much – is known about Caroline, her lover, and her corpulent and hypocritical husband. No embarrassment here, as almost everyone with a pen joined in the fray, including Percy Shelley, whose contempt for the queen was matched only by his eagerness to turn the controversy into good satire, designed, as Gardner affirms *Swellfoot* was, to bring down the monarchy and institute a democratic republic (212). Gardner's reading of Byron's response seems judicious: Byron was ambivalent, torn between a desire to do something to help her cause, and a knowledge of her culpability as an adulterer (ch. 9). Lacking Byron's aristocratic scruples, Shelley had no problem setting aside his own personal aversion to the queen in order to generate a politically useful text.

The conclusion makes the interesting observation that the period under discussion was 'the largest, and most politically and socially conscious display of class conflict that Britain had ever seen' (219). I will let the historians think about that assertion, but it seems true and might help explain the astonishing burst of literary creativity at this time, not just the texts Gardner discusses but those by Keats, Hemans, Scott, and Edgeworth. The conclusion also remarks on the legacy of Regency radical writing, as a dying Hone wishes to meet the young author of promise, Charles Dickens (223). This anecdote strikes the right note, I believe, because Dickens integrated many of the energies of popular art first expressed in the Regency, including of course the visual art of George Cruikshank.

The 'new' Regency portrayed by Gardner and discussed at the 2011 Symposium at Fordham

University is unlike the 1790s in the obvious respect that it has little to do with France and its revolution. From cosmopolitan to more nationalist concerns, the Regency culture articulates an ambiguously democratic politics, notably contained in the Queen Caroline controversy, as democratic ideas must make their way through the equivocal figures of monarchy (but the controversy also allowed for an expression of a gendered politics in new ways). Gardner's study is a valuable contribution to our understanding of a literary and political period that promises to attract more attention in the future.

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NANCY MOORE GOSLEE, *Shelley's Visual Imagination*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. vii + 275. £55.00 hardback. 9781107008380.

Nancy Moore Goslee's scholarly and sensitive book makes one wonder why critics have hitherto paid relatively little attention to the topic of 'Shelley's visual imagination' (though Neville Rogers in *Shelley at Work* has some rewarding pages). One answer has to be the comparative neglect until recently of the poet's drawings and sketches made more widely available through the publication between 1985 and 2002 of facsimile volumes with transcriptions of Shelley's notebooks in the Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts series (BSM) and the Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics series, both under the general editorship of Donald H. Reiman. Following on from Benjamin Colbert's 2005 study, *Shelley's Eye: Travel Writing and Aesthetic Vision*, events which offered some discussion of Shelley's interest in the visual, Goslee's monograph connects with her distinguished work on a notoriously difficult Shelleyan notebook (adds. e. 12; BSM 18) and is firmly focused on the relationship between Shelley's recently available notebooks and how they inform the finished poetry. Goslee's 1985 monograph, *Uriel's Eye: Miltonic Stationing and Statuary in Blake, Keats, and Shelley* had established her as a subtle reader of Romantic poetry and its Miltonic visual antecedents, and this new study confirms her as one of the foremost readers and interpreters of Shelley's poetry and its visual inflections.

With reproductions of Shelley's drafts, the reader can follow the author through the notebooks. Showing how the drafts, with their interaction of images and words, illustrate Shelley's poetic crafting, Goslee persuades the reader that Shelley does not merely reject the power of visual images, but places them under characteristic scrutiny. As she writes, there is no denial of the witnessing power of images, but rather 'a denial of their claims to an absolute transcendent authority or transparent transmission of truth that would deny human creativity and agency' (2). Goslee draws on a great deal of interdisciplinary research and weaves it into a thesis which insists on the ability of Shelley's poetry to 'both overthrow idols and posit new idols—emergent truths that are no longer voiceless or imageless yet are still subject to a Demogorgon-like skepticism' (27).

Offering a highly theoretically inflected introduction, Goslee's book challenges the line that Shelley, and Romantic poetry in general, rejects the visual. Separating her study into nine chapters (including the introduction), Goslee divides Shelley's poetry into works that she claims are based on a central personification (such as 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and *The Triumph of Life*) or on significant personification (for example, *Epipsychidion* and *Queen Mab*). In practice, however, this amounts to each chapter addressing a canonical poem which allows her to explore the poetry in significant detail with regards to its material production and its finished state in modern Shelley studies. Chapter two, entitled 'Mab's metamorphoses' sets the tone for the rest of the work as Goslee carefully analyses Shelley's drafts, notebooks, and sketches in order to show how Shelley learns as he writes at this early stage of his career. Her thoughtful exposition of Shelley's notebooks allows us to 'see how Shelley learns to exploit and to control the ambiguous yet potentially positive agencies of such personifications even as he attacks the icons of a corrupted or misled society' (28). This insight suggests the grounds of experimentation in Shelley's notebooks, where Shelley honed his craft as poet and where he sought to create poetry able to cope with, disrupt, and refigure society.

Chapter three focuses on 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' in order to argue that, like in the *Alastor* volume, Shelley depicts the tension between the public and the private spheres while he negotiates the struggle between 'material visuality and speech' (54). Goslee's very useful comparison between all the versions of the text reveals Shelley's emphases and the