James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (eds.),
*The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*

Reviewed by David Chandler, Doshisha University

The appearance of a *Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry* will doubtless raise a few eyebrows. Back in 1993 the same publisher brought out *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, edited by Stuart Curran, which has been, deservedly, a steady seller (by 2007 it had reached a ninth printing). That earlier volume was not wholly devoted to poetry—neither, for that matter, is the present one—but poetry naturally figured largely, and the preface recognized that “this book will most often be turned to by students of the six great poets who dominate the modern canon (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats)” (xiv). Between 2001 and 2006, moreover, Cambridge brought out a series of individual “Companions” to each of those “six great poets.” There would appear, then, to be no very pressing need for another Cambridge “Companion” to British Romantic poetry, and one takes up the present volume with some curiosity as to how it will justify its appearance.

As reviewers of Cambridge “Companions” have remarked in the past, the usefulness of the volumes in this series varies enormously. Sometimes they seem little more than collections of loosely connected, specialized essays written by the editor’s professional
chums. At their best, though, they are valuable introductory books in which the subject is broken down into a number of key topics on which carefully chosen experts distill succinct overviews from their stores of knowledge, presenting advanced information in an accessible form. Curran's *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* is an excellent example of how well the format can work. To take just one example of its riches: David Simpson's "Romanticism, criticism and theory," the first essay in the collection, seems to me an exemplary example of what a Cambridge "Companion" essay ought to be. Written off the back, as it were, of Simpson's important study, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (1992), it assumes little in the way of prior knowledge, painstakingly defines its own terminology, and manages to compress a great deal of learning into a few pages. It covers matters of unquestionable importance for anyone reading the Romantics, and is accessible to the undergraduate while also offering much for the seasoned scholar to reflect on.

Curran's volume set a high benchmark, then: one which the present volume is bound to be measured against. In my view the *Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry* falls somewhat short, as it tends more toward the specialized essay collection than the generally useful "Companion." The short guide to "Further Reading" at the end of each essay is all that distinguishes several of them from typical scholarly journal articles. Most, though not all, of the contributors make a limited attempt to open up their respective topics to the newcomer. But with the notable exceptions of Susan Stewart, Andrew Elfenbein and Tim Fulford, they do not keep their eyes on the target, if that was the target, and constantly drop in references to things the reader is clearly expected to know, but that only someone already well read in eighteenth-century and Romantic poetry, or specialized scholarship, would know. The range of difficulty is immense, and one can fault the editors for not having done more to insist that every contributor write "down" to a non-specialized audience. When Andrew Elfenbein, for example, refers to "Spenserianisms" he immediately adds, as a parenthetical gloss, "(imitations of the English used by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* [1590-6])" (85). That sort of information keeps the newcomer to the field engaged, while hardly slowing down those who know exactly what a Spenserianism is. Adriana Cracun, by contrast, yields the vocabulary of advanced gender studies—"scopophilia," "radicalized heterophilia," "heteronormative desire," "specularization of desire"—with no sort of gloss. The envisioned reader of the collection, then, would seem to be someone interested in Romantic poetry, who might not know what a Spenserianism is, but who won't blink at the notion of "heteronormative desire" (a search on the internet reveals that "heteronormativity" was a word coined by so-called queer theory in 1991). Perhaps that is a sign of the times.
None of this is to impugn the scholarly value of the essays, which is generally very high. The outstanding group, excellent not just in themselves but in the way they connect together, are those by Susan Stewart, Andrew Elfenbein, and Simon Jarvis. Stewart’s "Romantic meter and form," the closest to a genuinely introductory essay, makes the reader think hard about an aspect of poetry often neglected in our widely contextualizing times. As a distinguished poet herself, Stewart brings some very sensitive insights to her subject. Elfenbein’s "Romantic poetry and the standardization of English" is a highly original account of the way late eighteenth-century and Romantic period poets responded to the standardization of written English. He persuasively reads the Romantic poets as rejecting the extreme anti-standardization of some of their immediate precursors (Chatterton, Burns), while at the same time fighting shy of standard English: not surprisingly, given that standard English was essentially a prose form. Jarvis’s "Thinking in verse" is a good deal more challenging, but the difficulty derives from the difficulty of the subject rather than the sort of intellectual posturing seen in some of the other essays. Focusing on Blake, Shelley and Wordsworth, Jarvis argues that these poets not only "thought in verse" (rather than translating prose thoughts into poetry) but also thought deeply about the significance of thinking in verse. He fully deserves his conclusion "that their verse, and their thinking about it, present difficulties to literary criticism which literary criticism has only just begun to consider" (114). These three essays don’t overlap, but they often nudge towards each other, and having them all together is perhaps the best reason for buying the book.

Several of the other essays are individually excellent. James Chandler’s "Wordsworth’s great Ode: Romanticism and the progress of poetry" is an original, challenging account of the Intimations Ode, not as the personal lyric, or lyric addressed to Coleridge, that it has often been read as, but as a poem with more public concerns, "addressing the progress of poetry and of a poet" (144). Tim Fulford’s "Poetry, peripheries and empire" is a characteristically brisk, fresh account, opening up many angles on its subject. Fulford’s concern is not just with the colonial aspects of empire, but with the consumerist culture it created at home: in their radical phase, the Romantic poets were opposed to both. This is an essay to recommend to undergraduates, unlike Kevis Goodman’s demanding but fascinating "Romantic poetry and the science of nostalgia," which examines what nostalgia meant in the eighteenth century, and how it shaped Romantic poetry. Andrew Bennett’s "Romantic poets and contemporary poetry" is wholly enjoyable, and one wishes it were longer; it wears its great learning lightly and considers "the survival of the British Romantic poets as a vital, energizing force in later twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry" (264), focusing on Keats, Wordsworth and Clare.

Other essays are a bit less satisfactory. Jeffrey N. Cox’s oddly-titled "The living pantheon
of poets in 1820: pantheon or canon?,” placed first in the collection, is a rather bewildering account of how the modern canon of Romantic poetry relates to the entirety of poetic production in 1820. Impressively researched, it reads just like a specialized journal article; a more accessible account of how the Romantic canon evolved, and how it has been challenged, would have worked better here. Nick Groom’s “Romantic poetry and antiquity” reads like sketches for a book, a series of “dots” not joined up: and here, more than anywhere, one wonders at the general absence of Shakespeare from the discussion. Ann Wierda Rowlandson’s “Romantic poetry and the romantic novel” argues that to really understand Romantic period poetry one needs to understand its complex relationship to the contemporary novel, but there is too much generalization and too little demonstration: two examples are given of how passages in novels can be better understood by a reader familiar with the relevant poetry, but none of how a particular poem gains in meaning when read alongside novels. William Keach’s “Rethinking Romantic poetry and history: lyric resistance, lyric seduction” is the most difficult piece in the collection, Keach more than anyone clearly recognizing no difference between a Cambridge “Companion” essay and a specialized journal article. The first few pages are an extended gloss on Theodor Adorno’s, Walter Benjamin’s and Frank Lentricchia’s various ideas of “lyric resistance”—the way lyric poetry “resists” both history and the commercial culture which seeks to commodify it. It is easy to accept all this, and Keach’s own starting assumption that such “resistance” must often “exist in intriguing relation to” lyric poetry’s frequent concern with “erotic resistance and seduction” (223). The reader will need to concentrate very hard to discover what the relationship is, but one readily concedes that it must be a complicated business.

The remaining two essays are, unfortunately, fairly awful. It is hard to trace any overall argument in Adriana Craciun’s “Romantic poetry, sexuality, gender” apart from a general thesis that poetic identity in the Romantic period was deeply involved with gender politics. “Wordsworth’s model of poetry,” for example, is characterized as “represent[ing] an affective heterosexuality increasingly normative to the masculinity of British men” (156). The essay is packed with such ex cathedra judgments, suggesting that Craciun has the measure of everyone she surveys. Occasionally something in the way of supporting evidence is presented, but in almost every case the gap between what the evidence says and what Craciun concludes is so great that one starts to mistrust all the sweeping assertions. For example, she presents the canonical male poets fighting something of a rearguard action against the increased “feminization” of the poetic profession:

The proliferation of women’s poetry troubled to some extent all the canonical poets—
from Wordsworth's complaint in the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads* over the “deluges of idle and extravagant verse,” to Keats’s anxious distancing of his work from Mary Tighe’s *Psyche*, to Byron’s satirical attacks on Bluestockings as intellectual upstarts in *The Blues* (1821). (161)

Craciun does not characterize these as the *best* examples, but they are all she offers in support of one of her main contentions, so one would expect them to be, at the least, solidly impressive. They are anything but. Wordsworth’s attack on popular poetry—and he actually wrote “idle and extravagant *stories in verse*” (my emphasis)—does not feminize it. No edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, to my knowledge, suggests that Wordsworth was pointing his comment at female poets and their work. In fact the general assumption has been that he was gesturing at the rather “masculine” ballads of Gottfried Bürger, Matthew “Monk” Lewis and others, very voguish in the late 1790s. This, then, is not evidence at all, but an implausible and highly tendentious interpretation. As for “Keats’s anxious distancing,” Craciun is hardly on stronger ground. Keats, who was certainly influenced by Tighe (as he was by many poets), wrote in his journal-letter started on 16 December 1818: “Mrs. Tighe and Beattie once delighted me—now I see through them and can find nothing in them.” If that counts, in an extravagant reading, as an “anxious distancing” from Mrs. Tighe it must represent an equally anxious distancing from Mr. Beattie—which means, of course, that the comment is not nearly as gendered as Craciun would like it to be. The Byron example is only slightly stronger. To describe Craciun’s scholarship as sloppy would be generous; it actually demonstrates something like contempt for the reader’s understanding, suggesting that when the ideas are big enough the facts don’t matter much.

More scholarly, but even more pretentious, is Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane’s “The medium of Romantic poetry,” which aspires to be the coolest and most *relevant* piece in the collection. It starts with a series of supposedly urgent questions which will disturb anyone who takes them seriously:

Should university departments of “English” be subsumed into the more general category of “Media Studies”? Are authors mere “content providers” for owners of iPods and computers? Should poetry be shelved next to other forms of audio entertainment in media megastores? (239)

The answer to all three questions seems to be “Yes (but …)” because “poets in the Romantic era launch[ed] a wide range of transmedial investigations” (248). Don’t hold your breath for any reorganization of megastores. The essay contains a good deal of interesting
historical analysis, but dresses it up in a geekish sort of language that I found frankly ridiculous: “The mind-mapping of Romanticism offers us a media allegory, a kind of neural imaginary, a phantasy of unmediated plugged-in transport” (258). While it is easy to laugh at such desperate attempts to connect with children of the internet revolution, it is rather harder to do so at the many excruciating attempts at wit in the essay, which often read like tired parodies of hip young intellectuals showing off at dinner parties: “[Harold] Bloom’s Visionary Company evokes a kind of Romantic Broadcasting Company, an ‘RBC’ before the fact—the ‘viewless wings of poesy’ gone wireless” (240). One can only wonder how this highfalutin nonsense got into a Cambridge “Companion”: surely something on the Romantic sonnet, or the cult of Byron, would have been more serviceable, and ultimately more interesting.

This Cambridge “Companion” encompasses so much variety that it is difficult to discuss broad trends and patterns, but a few can be glimpsed. In terms of what constitutes Romantic poetry, these writers pay most attention to Wordsworth and Shelley, with Keats trailing a little behind. Making up something of a “second division” are Blake, Coleridge and Byron. In this sense, the traditional claims of the “Big Six” seem secure. Of new additions to the canon, it is Felicia Hemans who is given the most sustained attention: there is much more on her than on Barbauld, Landon and Charlotte Smith put together. Of the extra-canonical male authors, Southey and Moore seem to be the coming thing. Several important poets are scarcely mentioned. Fulford very briefly recognizes the significance of Walter Savage Landor’s epochal Gebir (1798): “After Landor, the Oriental romance became the single most popular Romantic form” (186). (Amazingly, though, when one turns to the “Chronology,” Gebir is not included, and the compilers consider it of more relevance to Romantic poetry that 1798 saw the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel, Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman!) When it comes to critical trends, one that stands out is an increasing interest in issues of national identity and feeling. Linda Colley is only explicitly mentioned once (by Elfenbein), but her Britons (1992) is clearly the ultimate source and inspiration for this focus. Theodor Adorno was, until very recently, seldom mentioned in Anglo-American Romantic scholarship, but here he is cited in the brief introduction, as well as by Jarvis and Keach. Perhaps he will, as the introduction suggests, prove a force to be reckoned with in the next few years.

The cover blurb asserts that this Cambridge “Companion” “offers a comprehensive overview and interpretation of Romantic poetry in its literary and historical contexts.” From a less reputable publisher that might be dismissed as over-heated sales talk. It is, at best, a selective overview. There is, just to start, almost nothing on the philosophical background to Romanticism, on the Romantics’ attitude to nature, on the ascendancy of
autobiography in the period, on the importance of the French Revolution and ensuing wars, on the relation of English to German Romanticism, on the mythopoetic aspect of Romanticism, or on the cult of Shakespeare. Similarly, many important Romantic poems are scarcely mentioned, let alone analyzed; one could read right through the volume without getting any clear idea of why the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* or *Childe Harold* are considered key moments in the history of English poetry. Altogether it is not a book for newcomers to Romantic poetry, who would be better served by Curran's earlier volume, or something like Uttara Natarajan's excellent *Romantic Poets: A Guide to Criticism* (Blackwell, 2007). In the introduction the editors make the more modest claim that "[o]ur contributors situate Romantic poetry in various matrices, contexts, and relations" (6). That is exactly what this "Companion" does, and it can be recommended to anyone who, having already made some study of the Romantics, seeks a deeper knowledge of the sheer variety of critical approaches to Romantic poetry on offer in the twenty-first century.

Barbara Caine,
*Bombay to Bloomsbury: A Biography of the Strachey Family*


ストレイチーという名前からすぐさま思い浮かぶのは、ヴァージニア・ウルフと親しくブルームズベリー・グループの一員であった伝記作家リットン・ストレイチーであろうか。また同時に、フロイトの弟子であり、かつフロイトの著作の翻訳者として名を馳せたジェイムズ・ストレイチー、20世紀初頭の代表的なフェミニズムの著作である*The Cause*の著者であるレイ・ストレイチーなども思い出される。その上さらに、女子校のレズビアンを扱った小説*Olivia*の作者ドロシー、ケンブリッジ大学のニューナム・コレッジの学長を長らく務めたパーセル、女性参政権運動にかかわったビッパなども含め、あらためて彼ら全員が一つ屋根の下で生まれ育った姉弟とその伴侶であることを思い起こすと、この一家の多彩な活力を感嘆させるを得ない。本書は、このようにイギリスの社会に大きな足跡を残したストレイチー家の伝記である。