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A History of Romantic Literature
(Wiley-Blackwell, 2019)
by Frederick Burwick

AS ITS TITLE SUGGESTS, THIS IS A BOOK WITH BIG AMBITIONS: in many respects, it realizes them with a history of Romantic literature—primarily British Romantic Literature—that's impressively inclusive and elegantly shaped. Organized in four parts that take the reader on a journey that begins with the French Revolution (1789–98) and moves on to the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), the years of "Riot" or political uprising (1815–20), and the era of reform (1821–32), Frederick Burwick's volume highlights broad historical themes and literary trends. It also provides detailed biographical information on a range of authors while conducting close, historically contextualized readings of many literary texts that are found on syllabi in courses on Romantic literature. The book might be best suited to graduate and upper-level undergraduate students who could make good use of an introductory text on the Romantic age. But Burwick's impressive grasp of such a wide range of reading, allowing him to acknowledge exciting connections among the texts he examines, will make the book of great interest to seasoned scholars as well. The somewhat high price tag for the book even in electronic form makes this inappropriate as a required text for students to purchase, so instructors will most likely end up assigning readings from library copies.

Burwick is well aware that a "history of Romantic literature" provokes numerous questions about its stated tasks. There's the usual issue of defining "Romantic" at all, and he traces out definitions and the controversies attending those definitions in his introduction. And what about "history" itself—how do we represent it? Even the most resolutely anti-Whig historian can eschew an ideology of development but nevertheless insist upon guiding narratives. What scholars call a "Romantic ideology"—a commitment to imaginative selfhood that provokes argument and contest throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—in fact invites, or even depends upon, such a narrative. Arguments about what voices get lost in the triumph of that ideology also depend upon accompanying or conflicting counternarratives. Burwick's aim is not to produce a single narrative, or even a set of narratives, about the period. Rather, he uses the series of parts of the book, from Revolution to reform, as thematic categories that capture "networks" of relationships. More specifically, he takes historical events or clusters of events—from the French Revolution to

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the Queen Caroline Affair—as the iconic representatives of historical themes. And he deploys those events as the occasion for establishing networks of texts, interpreters, and interpretations. Burwick reminds his readers at crucial moments that this is what he's up to: a broadly theoretical commitment to the "assemblage" and "network" leads him to explore adventurous connections among the works and topics he examines (2, 15).

The "network" approach echoes the work of Bruno Latour, but Burwick wisely steers clear of theoretical debate in a book that has other goals. It must still be added here, however, that the historical methodology joins other works—other histories of the Romantic period—that similarly avoid grand narratives about the Romantic period, and contrasts can be helpful to appreciate Burwick's methods. In *Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History*, Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis explicitly league themselves with scholars who are more or less skeptical about those narratives and also about attempts to identify the "Romantic" itself with a specific set of ideas.[2] *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, edited by James Chandler, is less a "coverage" of history than a collection of essays on topics familiar to critics of the period.[3] At this point in the history of criticism, when skepticism about definitions and narrative linearity is more or less the norm, I wonder whether a book that insists upon Romanticism as a coherent set of ideas with a single story of development might actually seem truly groundbreaking.

By organizing his book according to broad themes that roughly correlate with chronological periods, Burwick moves beyond a merely skeptical position in order to affirm a specific relation between history and texts. His approach, that is, allows him to refer to sequences of events without suggesting that sequence itself provides a causal logic that could be applied with a ricochet-effect to literary works. Instead, he takes historical events to be significant primarily because they attract various interpretations, and those interpretations beget still others. For example, in part 2, he turns to moments like the Napoleonic Wars, which have loomed large in virtually any conventional account of the period, and uses these moments as opportunities to explore associations that are far from conventional. Napoleon's campaign in Italy leads to a discussion of British travelers in Italy who noted Napoleon's presence. This carries him into to a discussion of Italian opera, and finally to Paganini's violin *Caprices*, all in the space of a few paragraphs (215). It's not altogether clear what claim is being made about Napoleon, British writers, Italian singers, and violin virtuosos, but the train of associations suggests that some kind of argument could be made. On such occasions, readers can only feel grateful that Burwick has traced out the connections in ways that are capacious and generous enough to welcome new arguments about them.

Occasionally, the networks explored in Burwick's history are given a

[2] Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis, *Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–18.

[3] James Chandler, ed. *The Cambridge History of English Romanic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

somewhat more determinate shape in which writers themselves are consciously constructing networks that affect the interpretation and construction of literature. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is a "hub of networking" in that it serves as the impetus for conversation among readers and reviewers from the time of its circulation in manuscript until years after its publication (39). And the network is also a thematic device for investigating the work of Keats when Burwick recounts how the poet engaged in a correspondence with a network of friends that provided him with interlocutors in his quest to explore "the truth of the imagination" (350). It should be noted here that the long section on Keats's poetry, a rich 18 pages, is a perfect example of how this history provides readers with extended sections on poets and novelists who are frequently taught in courses on Romanticism. (The "literature" named in Burwick's title usually consists of genres of poetry and prose fiction, with occasional nods to political or philosophical tracts by familiar figures such as Burke, Godwin, and Paine.) The more robust of these parts tend to focus on authors who have tended to dominate discussion in the last 100 years: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats all have extensive representation consisting of biographical information on the writers, accompanied by close readings of many major works. The sections on these authors will be valuable to all readers, and scholars working in the field will be grateful for a wealth of lively readings: Burwick's wonderful account of the importance of the ergot blight in Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*—condensing some of his earlier research on the poet—is a case in point (57–64).

The inclusion of other authors beyond the "big six" generally follows the practice of criticism since the 1980s, with notable discussions of Austen, Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Helen Maria Williams, among many others. Today's students of Romanticism will no doubt notice, however, that Burwick seldom attempts to contest the now decades-old boundaries around who counts as a British Romantic author. That is, he does not account for the ways in which critics such as Manu Chander and Karen Weisman have recently encouraged us to consider "brown" Romantics and Anglo-Jewish Romantics, respectively, as part of the history that might be told. Some readers will also wonder about why this admirably inclusive history gives short shrift to writers like Olaudah Equiano, John Clare, Elizabeth Inchbald, and others who have assumed a larger role in numerous accounts of the period, and who are now quite frequently taught in literature courses. The section on abolition mentions Equiano but doesn't quote him, inaccurately stating that that he "took" the name Gustavus Vassa—in fact, Lieut. Michael Pascal renamed him (31). Mary Shelley hardly fares better than these writers I have just mentioned; her work is given surprisingly little attention, usually as an aside in passages on Percy (332, 330, 388, 424); the tactic oddly turns the clock back on most accounts of the Percy/Mary relationship accumulated in the last half century.

While it's true that some readers will lament a more robust treatment of authors that they consider to be more central than marginal to their account of the period, those same readers, I believe, will find that there are many

occasions on which Burwick offers truly exciting and thought-provoking connections among the writers that he treats in detail. Some of these writers have been infrequently discussed by critics, and make only minor appearances in other literary histories of the period. No comparable history has made a better case for studying Samuel Rogers carefully, and for considering his place within the circle of British Protestant Dissenters. George Crabbe receives little attention in the Cambridge *History*, but he looms much larger in Burwick's, and there's a big payoff from this. Crabbe's attention to realism and psychological detail provide numerous connections to the history of novel, which Burwick explores here in order to show connections to Austen and Scott. Burwick also suggestively draws Wordsworth's *Excursion* into this discussion—a poem that faintly echoes the concerns of realist novels insofar as Wordsworth conjures novel-like characters and situations while also grandly confirming his utter lack of interest in the genre (256–61).

The Crabbe discussion is a fine instance of the way that many of the far-reaching networks studied in Burwick's volume will provoke discussions, research, and debate, inside and outside the classroom. The entire third section of the history, on "Riots" (I wish it had been named "Protests"), summons students and scholars of Romanticism to pay more attention to the economic hardship and class conflicts that animate the literature of the Romantic age: William Cobbett has certainly garnered close attention from critics, but Samuel Bamford and James Wroe (among others mentioned) are given serious treatment in these pages. Similarly, the fourth section shines a spotlight on the Queen Caroline affair as a rallying point for reformers; the trial of the Queen animated a chain of interpreters, and Burwick carefully traces out these debates and discussions among important writers such as Shelley, Byron, and Hazlitt. Just as in the choice of authors, of course, the choice of one event with its constitutive discourses over another raises plenty of questions: why, for instance, is the Queen Caroline affair given so much more attention in the "Reform" section of the book than the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts? The latter might appear to be far more consequential within the history of reform, but such a claim once again underlines the distinctiveness of the historical method in Burwick's volume. Rejecting the idea of a narrative history means, among other things, that the criteria for determining the importance of one event versus another doesn't emerge from an analysis of political causes and effects over time. This is not to say that Burwick's method is simply arbitrary but rather that the criteria for zeroing in on specific moments in history emerge from the literary works themselves: that is, the works accord gravity to events purely as a consequence of their repeated interpretation of them. Because of this reasoning—we get history through collective memory—it's fair to say that Burwick produces a Romantic history of Romanticism: one in which spots of time are awarded a renovating virtue from a retrospective literary consciousness. This is not simply the consciousness of a single Wordsworthian poet; it's the collective consciousness of the Romantic writers whom Burwick not only documents and analyzes, but also affirms and enacts.