Joanna E. Taylor [1]

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William Gilbert and Esoteric Romanticism: A Contextual Study and Annotated Edition of The Hurricane

(Liverpool University Press, 2018)

by Paul Cheshire

BRISTOL, 1796. A RADICAL NEW POEM IS CAUSING A STIR among the city's readers and writers. A group—poets themselves—might gather at their publisher Joseph Cottle's shop to reflect on this incursion. 'A strange poem,' one says—one who, within the next two years, will come to write his own 'strange' rime. His companions concur. The poem is unsettling: 'altogether wilder,' as Paul Cheshire writes in this exploration of it, 'than well-groomed literature' (2). Yet, in the months and years to come, they find that William Gilbert's *The Hurricane* recurs to them, voicing itself in their own poetic thinking and endeavours.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth were 'all impressed enough by [Gilbert's] poem to praise it, quote from it, adopt imagery from it, and promote it on his behalf' (1). Cheshire's study examines how Gilbert's 'strange' poem infiltrated British Romanticism, particularly through the Lake Poets' works. Not least, Cheshire demonstrates how many of the international references in early works by Coleridge, Southey, and—especially—Wordsworth reflect the global perspective that Gilbert introduced. But it goes further, too, to uncover elements in *The Hurricane* that have been overlooked in mainstream Romanticism. Cheshire sensitively and thoroughly situates Gilbert's poem as a new starting point for a radical revisioning of the period's literary heritage.

The book's structure cleverly enacts this embedding of *The Hurricane* into an alternative Romantic timeline. The first five chapters introduce Gilbert, situating his biography among the lives of Bristol's contemporary literary circles, and especially examining Gilbert's friendships with the three future Lake Poets. A carefully annotated edition of the poem comes in the middle, and Cheshire's gloss makes legible a poem that, otherwise, deliberately seems to be trying to confound its reader—almost turning them in circles, as though the vengeful spirits it describes are using the poem as both mouthpiece and revolutionary tactic. The final chapters offer insightful analyses of the poem in light of four core themes: geography, theosophy, slavery, and esotericism. The result is a book that uses Gilbert's life and works, and especially *The Hurricane*, masterfully to exhibit a re-centring that enacts little short of a decolonisation of Romantic scholarship.

William Gilbert has been, before this (re-)habilitation, little more than an odd Romantic anecdote, yet Gilbert's biography interacts with some of Romanticism's most pressing concerns. Born in 1763 in Antigua—where 'Sun-beams glitter with perennial force' (Gilbert, 'Fragment,' 64)—to a third-generation plantation owner, as a young man of 15 Gilbert joined the Navy and fought for England in the American Revolution. These places and the peoples who lived there significantly impacted on Gilbert's later writing; as Cheshire puts it, 'even if *The Hurricane* is not centrally *about* slavery—it is certainly *infected* by it' (12), and an interest in the experiences and narratives of the oppressed, the concealed, or the deliberately overlooked weaves throughout Gilbert's life. This sympathy was heightened in light of his own troubles. He arrived in England long-term in 1786, in pursuit of a promising legal career that had impressive foundations in Antigua. But career pressures and disappointments seem to have facilitated a mental breakdown,

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[1] Joanna E. Taylor is Presidential Fellow in Digital Humanities at the University of Manchester. Her research focuses on literary geographies, environmental histories, and digital humanities, and she has published on these topics in journals including *Studies in Romanticism* and the *International Journal of Geographical Information Science*. Her book, co-authored with Ian N. Gregory and titled *Deep Mapping the Literary Lake District*, is forthcoming with Bucknell University Press.

after which he went to the asylum near Bristol run by the 'legendary' (22) John Henderson (a biography of whom was one of Coleridge's unfinished projects).

By 1791, Gilbert was living in London and earning fame as a prominent contributor to the popular *The Conjuror's Magazine*, a publication that enjoyed circulation of around 10,000 copies a month (at least, according to its editor Henry Lemoine) (25). Gilbert became well known for his predictions, and for his assessments of previous astrological forecasts' accuracy. He was especially interested in the newly discovered planet Uranus (found by William Herschel in 1781), and his work across these areas combined with his Methodist upbringing to form, Cheshire writes, 'a cosmic blueprint that unites man with God' (33). Cheshire concludes that, taken together, Gilbert's 'fiercely anti-rationalist astrological writings offer an important window into what has been seen as a fallow period for astrology' (41). It's a significance that, Cheshire convinces, we would do well not to overlook; whatever our own era's scepticism, astrology was a subject of often anxiety-inducing fascination for Gilbert's contemporaries.

Back in Bristol by 1796, Gilbert became familiar with the group of poets who collected around Cottle. Coleridge published poetry and essays by him in the ill-fated journal *The Watchman*, while Gilbert seems to have had some influence over Coleridge's thinking on accentual verse (65). More than that, Gilbert offered Coleridge an example in how narrow the gap might be between genius and madness (67), a gap that Coleridge's verse was subsequently fascinated by, and Cheshire makes a compelling case that Coleridge is the 'Friend' that Gilbert describes in the advertisement to *The Hurricane*. For Southey, Gilbert was 'my astrological friend,' and *The Hurricane* alluring to the point of danger: 'I have lost myself,' he wrote to Cottle, 'in the bottomless profundity of Gilbert's papers' (75). Cheshire finds in this friendship an indication of a lesser-known Southey, someone who was both a dependable friend and relative, and who was alert 'to the visionary side of life' (77). It was Southey who 'took charge' when Gilbert disappeared without a trace early one morning in July 1798, and who acquired the papers Gilbert left behind. None of the British Romantics ever heard from him again. In fact, Gilbert had gone to Charleston in America, where he died in 1825 (as Cottle found out from a niece of Gilbert's several years later) (85).

Gilbert left behind him ongoing shockwaves from his 'millennialist' (77) prosimetric (163), *The Hurricane*, and this edition promises to return the poem as a centrepiece of early Romanticism. Cheshire's careful and thorough annotations make sense of a poem that 'comprehends a scope of design far beyond vulgar research' (Gilbert, 'Preface to *The Hurricane*,' 104), while the presentation of the complete poem allows us to fall anew into Gilbert's 'bottomless profundity.' *The Hurricane* proves Gilbert to have been adept with imagery and poetic diction, and expert at manipulating metre:

> These peaceful murmurs and these pure consults
> Of nearing Bliss, speak thunder to the *North*.
> They give prognostic to the fear-worn ears
> Of list'ning usurpers of their fertile clime,
> In sounds unscanned, of pondered HURRICANES;
> When they remount on air triumphant, joined
> With dread auxiliars riding on the wave,
> And shew their greatness—over pale Europe's
> Miniatures of winds! Reigning superior
> To their victors mean, as in fost'ring Peace
> So in black War's rude crash; as in melody,
> Just in great discords, throughout all the maze
> Of involute, transversive harmony,
> Till they repoise the scale in tonal peace;
> Victors on Europe, witherers of her might! (ll.60–74, 110)

This is a poem that attempts to elide body with spirit, and that shift from the 'sounds unscanned' that describe the storm, to the 'tonal Peace' that soothes the metre too, is an exhilarating instance

of Gilbert's metrical attempts to enact that union. Even without the revolutionary vision encoded in the poem, *The Hurricane*—both the poem and Gilbert's extensive notes—challenges convention through metrical experimentation, the inclusion of knowledge forms beyond more usual subjects, argumentation with previous theories from the Biblical to the Newtonian, and by recalibrating the geographies of global power and influence. Cheshire's analyses of the poem in the final chapters range from what he calls Gilbert's 'hermetic geography,' to the poem's engagements with race and slavery (and the tensions inherent to believing in liberty whilst being the son of a slave-owner), to an explication of the 'esotericism' on which the poem relies. These essays complement the work of the edition by elucidating how Gilbert's concerns in *The Hurricane* speak to contemporary reconfigurations of British world views. Cheshire's extensive knowledge of Romanticism and other 'esoteric' subjects, alongside an inspiring curiosity, allows him to address the poem sensitively and seriously to demonstrate its potential to impact significantly on our understandings of at least three core areas of modern Romanticism: global geography; critical understandings of race and racism; and the relationship between humanity and the non-human world.

There are some elements that are unusual for this kind of writing: the glossary of terms in the introduction, for instance, or the distinctive structure. Future academic studies might learn much from these apparatus, which—alongside an openness about sources and references that acknowledges the intellectual collaborations necessary to produce work of this richness—deliberately and self-consciously make sure that Cheshire's reader is alongside him across his analysis. It is further evidence of the characteristic warmth and wit embedded throughout these pages: generically 'strange,' perhaps, but thoroughly well done.