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The Collected Poems and Journals of Mary Tighe
(The University of Kentucky Press, 2005)
edited by Harriet Kramer Linkin

HARRIET KRAMER LINKIN'S ANTHOLOGY of Mary Tighe's works is a very welcome addition to the worlds of Gender Studies and Methodist poetics. Linkin provides everything from an upbeat introduction to a chronology, from carefully annotated poems to two memoirs and as well a journal and even poems dedicated to Tighe by other Romantic poets like Hemans, Moore and Roscoe. Every conceivable angle is obsessively covered. Indeed Linkin twice exhorts the reader: "Readers of Psyche will want to look closely at the extended erotic presentation of Cupid and Psyche" (xxv), and "readers will want to savor the consistent quality of Tighe's language play" (xxvi). Doubtless so, but this reader by far prefers leafing through poems in search of his own pleasures. Linkin relates that contemporary reviewers heaped rich garlands of praise upon Tighe's Spenserian epic *Psyche*, Mackintosh describing it as "the most faultless series of verses ever produced by a woman" (xvii). Personally, I find this comment patronising in the extreme—does it matter if Tighe was a woman who wrote poetry?—or does it matter more that her verses should stand or fall upon their own aesthetic merits? For me the latter is the more important point. Yet repeated perusals *Psyche* reveal an uneven poem; the stanzas towards the end have far more force than those at the beginning. Judged all in all, her intricate Spenserian allegory seems too slavishly a work beholden to the Renaissance to be adjudged majorly Romantic. This said, extended passages of *Psyche* are often quite beautifully written and would seem flawless as Tighe's celebrated good looks.

For me, the real interest to Tighe's poetry lies in the tussle between her Calvinist Methodist temperament and the concept of sensuality. Though the problem here is again that the religious allegory gets in the way of the sensuality; it prevents the kind of lush personal poetic expression that her verses nevertheless instilled in the similarly tubercular Keats, as Reiman and others have ably demonstrated with reference to "Ode to Psyche". But it is possible to detect other Keatsian touches, such as when a vile magician,

> Changed to a serpent's hideous form, he stole
> O'er her fair breast to suck her vital blood;
> (117)

Her imagery here recalls *Lamia* and *Christabel*. I am reminded of "Kubla Khan" at one point in *Psyche*, when Tighe writes that "Pleasure had call'd the fertile lawns her own" and then in the next stanza that,

> Amid their native rocks conceal'd awhile,

> Then o'er the plains in devious streams display'd,
> Two gushing fountains rise; and thence convey'd,
> Their waters through the woods and vallies play,
> Visit each green recess and secret glade,
> With still unmingled, still meand'ring way,
> Nor widely wand'ring far, can each from other stray.
> (I, l.145-162, p. 61)

The poem was written in 1801-2, so in all likelihood Tighe had not read Coleridge's unpublished manuscript. More generally, *Psyche* reminds of Spenser, or, at times, of Bunyan. The suspicion is that like Linkin's introduction, Tighe tries too hard, which provides strong evidence for Tighe's profound sense of insecurity at being a "female" poet. Consequently, her verses often come to life when she relaxes just a little. As such, easily the most natural poem in the collection would seem "A Letter From Mrs. Acton to Her Nephew Mr. Evans", in which Tighe warns a young man called George to brush up on his learned accomplishments before visiting intellectual relatives at Rosanna:

> In alembics by blow pipes with chemic perfection,
> The meat is oxidised by Harry's direction;
> While in salads they search for the stamens and pistils
> The rice pudding cools in rhomboidal chrystals,
> And the carver takes care tho' the venison he mangles
> To part ev'ry portion in proper triangles.
> Bread and butter is cut in forms mathematic,
> And the tea urn distils with art hydrostatic;
> (38)

Doggerel, yes, but of an engagingly witty kind that I find winning. Tighe writes in a personal voice freed from allegorical, devotional, or twee pastoral concerns all too rarely and, sadly, one of the most poignant of her poems is actually a translation:

> Thus to have loved and loved to extasy
> And be beloved again—Oh rapturous bliss!
> Destroyed and lost! (165)

Caroline Hamilton's memoir records that while young Tighe was "accused of coquetting with her cousin Henry… who became so violently attached to her that he threatened to go off to America… if she refused to marry him" (253). The inevitable result was an unhappy marriage.

The pleasure/punishment theme runs through much of her work. An unnamed sonnet reflects on "Delusive pleasure"(p.46), whereas "The Old Maid's Prayer to Diana" figures "spleen at beholding the young more caressed" (175). One of her best, most expressive efforts, "Pleasure", begins as an address to "syren Pleasure" and those that "seek for bliss in Dissipation's

arms", but then mutates into a sensuous description of Senegal and the "wasted health" of those "ghastly victims" of the Middle Passage. We have here a powerful extended metaphor for the slavery that deceitfully poisonous pleasure brings in a poem that contains phrases like "charmed opiate", "faithless dreams" and the repeat-adjectival phrase "charmed mariner". The poem was written in 1802, so it may well be that Tighe anticipated modern Empsonian readings of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by over 150 years. Tighe's poetic psychology would seem closer to Hannah More's couplets on the slave trade, than Coleridge's leprous imagery. Although Coleridge still utilizes allegorical figures occasionally in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—for instance "Death-in-Life"—and, of course, his marriage became poisoned too. Since connubial infelicity and the delusive pleasures of opium seem a recurrent if occasional theme in Tighe's writings, it would be interesting to know more of Coleridge's reading of her work. And yet, the Senegal couplets for all their pious asperity are rather sensuous compared to Tighe's more characteristic devotional tone:

> Putrescence loads the rank infected ground,
> Deceitful calms deal subtle death around;
> (165)

Often her poetry is written on pious topics like Hagar or Jeremiah, which indicates a biblical cast to her thoughts, and which stifles Romantic individuality and the augmenting life of the mind. For example, her journals quote the most famous line ever written by a Methodist, i.e. "God moves in mysterious ways", and another poem is dedicated to a reading of Hayley's biography of Cowper. However, Tighe seldom adopts the conversational tone of *The Task* in her poetry, and instead, she serves the scraps of Calvinistic divinity, in lieu of Coleridgean "divine Chit chat".

Tighe's mother writes tuttingly of those worldly London types, who "encouraged her in every vanity & folly"(p.233); Hamilton suggests that Tighe's love of the theatre was a particular object of puritanical scorn for her mother. The family-censored Journals reveal a key encounter on 11 April 1789, when Tighe breakfasted with one of the Wesley brothers:

> … he prayed, remembering me in the most tender & ardent manner. When he rose from his knees he took hold of my hand & said 'dear Molly, expect that there are blessings in store for you'. He turned to my bookcase & said 'there are many books here, Molly, not worth your reading' & then observed a good deal on idle books, particularly fine poetry. Said that History & religious books were the best study. (215)

She was seventeen at the time and already suffering from a consumptive cough, which led her family to send her to Switzerland for a rest cure. A definite ideological silence in the anthology would seem Linkin's chronology,

which mentions that Tighe travelled through France during the summer of 1792. Yet, no mention of French revolutionary politics surfaces in her journals and likewise there are no references to Wolfe Tone's rebellion of 1798 in the same "spiritual" journal. Her mother's memoir is hardly more informative, glibly mentioning the convulsions that shook Europe and that her daughter remained in Ireland for most of the period during which the Irish rebellion took place. Nevertheless, Tighe wrote an archly satirical poem on the topic of the Act of Union and another sonnet written in a copy of *Psyche* presented to Charles Fox contains the elusive word "liberty", and the telling phrase, "patriot's eye" (201). She writes in a letter that thousands of young men have been corrupted by visiting Italy, but on the topic of the republican Milton that "the speeches he gives to the Heavenly Beings appear to me generally tedious… What can be more absurd than his transformation of the Devils into serpents & and his converting their applause into a hiss!" (259). But did Wittreich deign to collate Tighe's informed opinion in *The Romantics on Milton*?

Why did the Duke of Wellington come to Tighe's bedside, when modern critics generally-speaking do not? By which I mean that Linkin's well-wrought anthology convinces me. The last word deserves to go to Mrs. Hemans, who wrote no less than four elegies to Tighe, the most fitting image in these being that of a "bright butterfly", which image melds Psyche and Tighe admirably (278).