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The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Volume VII
(Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021)
by Nora Crook

NORA CROOK, SOLE EDITOR OF THIS, the penultimate volume of Shelley's poetry, begins her acknowledgements with the admission that "[t]his volume is shaded by loss" (xv). There are many kinds of loss that swirl through this collection of posthumous writings, volume seven of the Johns Hopkins edition of Shelley's poetry, but what Crook wins from these losses is a landmark achievement for Shelley studies in particular and Romantic studies in general. The general editors of all volumes are Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook, and the founding editors are Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, with the former receiving a handsome tribute following his death in 2019 in Crook's acknowledgements. Reiman and Fraistat, along with several others including Michael O'Neill (a co-dedicatee of this volume) and Michael J. Neth, are vital presences in the commentaries. As Crook writes, the plural pronoun used throughout "represents no fiction but is a marker that *CPPBS* has always been and continues to be a team effort" (xv). This "team effort" has the effect of making the commentary and the editing feel like the result of tremendous cumulative knowledge about and enthusiasm for Shelley's literary achievements even as Crook's individual editorial ability is astonishing.

Volume seven, published before volumes four, five, and six, is dedicated to the poetry and drama that Shelley left unfinished and/or unpublished. Crook notes that "Except for those taken from fair copies, we do not call these *poems*, but *poetry*, *fragments*, *drafts*, *stanzas*, *lines*, *verses*, *items*, or *pieces*, as appropriate" (xix). What Crook chooses not to emphasise is the incredibly difficult editorial work that this amounts to for those who would reconstruct Shelley's texts. Such difficulty is met by serious expertise. Editorial principles are clearly outlined. Crook records and justifies the decision that "[c]ommentaries and Supplements furnish abundant selections from PBS's discarded draft, but this does not attempt to be a genetic edition" (xix). She also reveals throughout this volume the very real care and proficiency that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley brought to bear on her edition of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems* (1824). This volume contains much of Shelley's lyric poetry, including "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci," "The Zucca," "Ginevra," amongst many others, along with *The Triumph of Life*, *The Historical Tragedy of Charles the First*.

The sheer quantity of allusions, sources, and influences traced in this volume bears witness to Shelley's erudition. The poet moves between his immediate peers (Byron, Hunt, and Keats) and older peers (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey), to Classical and biblical authorities, philosophers

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from Socrates to Kant, and even political theory and various scientific advances. All the while, the editors carefully note and tease out Shelley's capacious and restless imagination for the reader. Crisscrossing between languages, cultures, and traditions, Crook manages to make her editorial notes concise yet full, illuminating but not overwhelming. Crook resists the temptation to simplify or offer solutions that would offer apparent unity, certainty, or completion to Shelley's texts. As such, given the contradictory evidence she sets out, Crook forebears to date "Autumn" definitively (435). Crook's comprehensive and generous handling of scholarship on Shelley's life and work sees her use it to offer her readers a plethora of suggestions for how best to interpret the texts in question and show the number of possibilities at work even in the shortest lyrics. Readers can turn to Crook's notes with confidence that her commentaries will point them in useful and profitable directions for further study.

The jewel in the crown of this volume is undoubtedly *The Triumph of Life*, a poem that even T. S. Eliot, in the throes of his rejection of Shelley and Romantic poetry, could praise.[2] As well as providing an excellent text of Shelley's "generally untidy draft" (219), Crook provides a superlative commentary upon the fragment, testing hypotheses about its compositional history and offering considered judgements, such as where she agrees with Reiman's argument that composition was suspended on 1 July 1822. She also reveals the stakes of editorial judgements, explaining the significance of whether Shelley made a fair copy of the fragment "after breaking off or during an interval in the drafting" (218). This commentary, in common with other volumes in the Johns Hopkins edition, brings together compositional history, manuscript dating and condition, biography, formal and generic discussion, critical responses, sources and influences, amongst other details, rendering the volume compendious and indispensable to scholars and students of Romantic poetry. Crook also provides a fascinating reading of perhaps one of the most discussed mysteries in Shelley studies: the question of the wording and most likely interpretation of a cryptic remark in the draft of *The Triumph of Life*. Crook describes it thus: "On the final page of *Triumph* draft (f. 52v), above 'Those soonest, from whose limbs the', under 'have fallen,' and to the left of 'way side,' there appear, in tiny characters in the same ink, the words 'Alas I kiss you' followed by a disputed word written with a drying nib and read as 'Jane' (1960), or 'Julie'" (334). So as not to spoil the surprise and the quality of the editorial commentary, I will not supply the ingenious reading given, but instead applaud the sensitivity of the suggested interpretation.

But this is not the greatest achievement of the volume. *The Historical Tragedy of Charles the First*, so frequently overlooked in Romantic studies, finds its ideal rendering in this text. Though familiar in terms of some of its themes, such as its approach to and images of tyranny, Shelley's play as reconstructed by Crook reveals the poet's real power as a dramatist. Charles observes his Fool, Archy,

[2] See, for example, T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 90.

steeped in the tradition of Shakespeare's archly knowing Fools, with these words:

> Poor Archy,
> He weaves about himself a world of mirth
> Out of the wreck of ours—and like a parrot
> Hung in his gilded prison from the window
> Of a queen's bower over the public way
> Blasphemes with a bird's mind.—His words like arrows
> Which know an aim beyond the archer's wit
> Strike sometimes what eludes philosophy.
> (*Charles the First* 1.2.107–14)

Archy is another of Shelley's doubles, a double that functions partly as a meditation upon the role of the poet. Charles' description offers no bromides but a dangerously equivocal sense of the poet's place in society. If the poet can utter words "like arrows" and hit targets that philosophy cannot, he can only do so "sometimes." His double is not a swan, as the Alastor poet could claim, but a parrot, and his place is only a "gilded prison" rather than the "world of mirth" to which he aspires. There are important differences between these quoted lines and the speech given in *Posthumous Poems*. Most significantly, Crook's new version of the play draws out the artistry at work in this fragment, seeing the play as a real intervention into Romantic drama provoked, in part, by Byron's efforts in the arena, especially *Marino Faliero*. Moreover, Coleridge is vital for Shelley in this volume, just as he was in Shelley's earlier efforts. "Tell me of the political state of England" wrote Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock in 1816, "—its literature, of which when I speak Coleridge is in my thoughts."[3] It is fascinating that the Coleridge invoked by Shelley in this play is the Coleridge of *Religious Musings* (see 650 and 655), alluded to twice in this short fragment. Here we see that Shelley never gave up or revised his sense of Coleridge's importance. Shelley's deft allusions to other voices, other poems, render his own more rather than less unique.

Though Shelley might have been right to say of poetic analysis, "[v]eil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed,"[4] Crook's work comes as close as we can hope to unveiling the beauty of Shelley's poetry and drama. Shelley has been recently favoured with two superb scholarly editions of his complete poems, with the Johns Hopkins volumes and the Longman volumes both representing excellence in the field. With volume seven raising the bar once again, this series is the gold standard for Shelley scholarship. Its expert and illuminating readings are peerless.

[3] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 1. 490.
[4] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 693.