Jeff Strabone[1]

reads

Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry

(Cambridge University Press, 2017)

by Michael Gamer

WHAT IS THE OBJECT OR UNIT OF ANALYSIS when we consider the many cases of Romantic-era poets producing new print editions of their works? Michael Gamer's book *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry* demonstrates how the published book, specifically the (self-)edited volume of already-published works, can meaningfully be read as its own literary-interpretive object and as an important and revealing act in a poet's career. Rather than the great-souled poet favored by some twentieth-century critics, Gamer presents the poet as self-interested proprietor of his or her estates—real and literary alike—properly concerned with the sorts of things we might nowadays call "branding". Appropriately for a late capitalist twenty-first century increasingly skeptical of claims that separate aesthetics from economics, Gamer's book reminds us that some of our favorite poets were simultaneously keen about both.

Gamer's term for describing such books is "re-collection", which he defines as "the authorized, transformational reprinting of works that have appeared earlier in some other form […] so as effectively to produce a new work" (2). For Gamer, professional writers in the age of print capitalism are always already compromised: answerable not just to their muses but to publishers, publics, critics, copyright laws, rights holders, and their own household dependents who rely on their incomes. The re-collection then "provides an arena for thinking about the relation between self-commodification and self-canonization in ways that foreground both the presence of writers and their compromised agency in literary production" (4).

That Romantic-era poets revised their poems over and over is nothing new, but a series of case studies of the particular *volumes* where they did so—and how the same poems mean differently by their new placements among other poems—may be. The premise of the book is hard to dispute: poets and publishers produced later editions of the same material with revisions, additions, subtractions, and higher-prestige features like more expensive paper, expanded paratexts, wider margins, and so on. Any poem or other art object gets its meaning not just from its contents but by its adjacency to other objects. We all know this, but how thoroughly have we theorized how to read such books as objects of analysis unto themselves?

One of the book's most valuable contributions is to provide a methodological road map and a series of demonstrations for the close and contextualized reading of individual volumes of re-collected poems as distinct

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art objects in their own right. What these volumes show us in Gamer's close readings is how, from one collection to another, Romantic-era poets were carefully revising their corpuses towards one or another public performance of authorial selfhood and what conditions—social, critical, economic, reputational—motivated *particular* revisions of authorial selves at particular moments in time. In short, Gamer shows us how a book revises its own contents. One of its great strengths is how sensitively he translates the new messages that come from old poems newly rearranged.

Regarding the poet not just as self-curator but as businessperson is an approach that some will not like, yet Gamer's arguments will be hard to refute. Even readers who like to imagine their poets on pedestals and their poetic visions unmediated will have to admire the care, contextualization, and close readings that characterize each chapter. The book's cases proceed not chronologically but as a series of different types: collected works, subsequent editions of ostensibly the same book, an anthology of newspaper verse, laureate verse, and, in Percy Shelley's case, a posthumous edition. The method brings together the republished poems with correspondence, contract negotiations, transfers of copyrights, and contemporaneous reviews. The effect is not to bring the poet down to the counting-house but to show how real-world cares of reputation and income also shaped their work and how understanding such cares can profitably inform our interpretations. The writing of poetry and the business of poetry proceeded apace—and that's okay.

Gamer's interlocutors are named and unnamed. He borrows from Leo Braudy and Andrew Bennett on posterity and posthumous concerns and separates himself from Michel Foucault and William St. Clair on the legal and economic foundations of authorship and the feedback between authors and readers. At a deeper level, he gives another twist to the turn associated with Jerome McGann in 1983—away from the generation of Abrams, Bloom, and Hartman—to step outside the terms of Romantic poets' self-representations. Gamer's book aligns with efforts towards a more pluralist Romanticism beyond the traditional narrow scope of six or so big male poets. The standout instance is the attention devoted to Charlotte Smith and the crafty steps she took to protect her literary property from her predatory husband, whose claims to own her work were supported by the patriarchal foundations of British law. Gamer humanizes Romantic-era poets as professional people needing to make decisions about reshaping, recrafting, and rebranding their work for the readerly markets of the material world.

Gamer devotes two chapters to Wordsworth's re-collected editions: first the 1815 *Poems* and, three chapters later, the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*. The non-chronological treatment invites us to see each volume as a distinct intervention in a poet's career at a particular moment in time. Mimicking publishers' canons of (dead) national poets, the 1815 *Poems* in Gamer's reading is a mid-career work by a poet reaching for a loftier mantle. Where Wordsworth's 1807 *Poems, in Two Volumes* placed "personal responses to everyday events at the center of its project", the arrangement of poems in the 1815 volume was less about

indulging eccentricity and more about locating himself as a poet of the universal (40).

The 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* is perhaps the most scrutinized Romantic-era recollection, yet Gamer turns it into a gripping story of copyright loss and recovery and, arguably, a key to Wordsworth's development as a legally self-aware professional writer. Wordsworth, still inexperienced in the law of publishing, lost control of his work while absent in Germany. Joseph Cottle tried to sell the copyrights he controlled to T. N. Longman, who estimated the value of *Lyrical Ballads* as worthless and thus declined to take it. Cottle at that point gifted the copyright back to Wordsworth, who reshaped and expanded the book in 1800. Gamer convincingly argues that this experience "proved foundational to his subsequent views on literary property, publication, and bookselling. Chief among the lessons learned was that of retaining and managing his intellectual property" (121). Wordsworth became "a writer determined to maintain critical control over his texts and over the authorial self he projected through them" (121–22). The chapter ends with a fresh, provocative reading of Wordsworth's "Michael", where Gamer asks whether "Michael's anxieties about property and inheritance are also Wordsworth's" (154). Throughout the book, Gamer's interpretations of individual poems are grounded in his close readings of the economic and literary-proprietorial situations their authors faced at the time of their republications.

The moral heart of the book may be Gamer's chapter on Charlotte Smith, where the details of her literary estate management become a story of feminine desperation and empowerment in the face of patriarchy and abuse. Smith was forced to devise increasingly complex means to protect her income from her deadbeat husband, who returned from France in 1788 to steal it from her. Besides recounting Smith's legal shell game, Gamer zeroes in on changes in the contents, sequence, and paratexts of the third (1786) and fifth (1789) editions of Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*. In Gamer's account, her career demonstrates "how economic opportunity impacts poetic and bibliographic form" (57). As a woman poet living precariously, Smith saw to the repackaging and republication of already published material as a means of survival.

The argument of Gamer's third chapter, on the Della Cruscans, is that the medium is the message. Reconstructing the publication history of their verse and the calumny it eventually provoked, Gamer shows that the attacks, most famously those by William Gifford starting in 1791, did not begin until their verse was collected in an edition thought by some to be too fancy, too permanent, and too monumentalizing for their light, ephemeral output. The Della Cruscan poets were chiefly known for newspaper verse until John Bell pulled out the stops and republished them in a posh edition called *The British Album*, a title whose grandiosity did not go unanswered. In Gamer's account, giving them pride of place alongside other canons of national literature turned the tide of opinion against them. Bell's edition "presented an unpardonable instance in which the Della Cruscans appeared in high cultural packaging accompanied by unqualified assertions of their unquestionable merit. For

Gifford, then, Bell's attempts to repurpose Della Cruscan verse into high cultural artifacts amounted to multiple usurpations of literary authority" (117). Thus, for Gamer, the medium shift accounts for the shift in opinion: because they rose above their station print-wise, they received their critical comeuppance.

Gamer's concept of the poet as businessperson gets its most explicit treatment in his chapter on Southey, whose ambivalence towards his role as poet laureate shaped his writerly and professional choices. Southey tried to remake the laureateship and, failing to do so, ultimately tried to bury it amid his ten-volume *Poetical Works* of 1837–38: his title as laureate absent from the title page, his laureate poems dispatched to his volume of "Juvenile and Minor Poems". Attention is also given to Southey's "longer process of re-collection" in the wake of his appointment, including his effort to convert his stipend into a life insurance policy (184). His prolific, multi-generic œuvre becomes part of a strategy of "hedging risk" (159) and diversifying his "investment portfolio" in "the business model of Robert Southey" (176).

The final chapter takes a slightly different path in exploring a posthumous collection not edited by the poet—*The Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* of 1824, rather than the better-known four-volume *Poetical Works* of 1839—and how Mary Shelley used it to change a public conversation that had been dominated by her husband's political opponents. Gamer carefully shows how Mary framed a selected portion of the corpus to negate political imputations and, in doing so, disarmed Percy's enemies. As in the chapter on Smith, here, too, a woman living in precarious conditions needed to secure a literary estate. Mary did so in large part by omitting unpublished politically charged poems like "The Mask of Anarchy". Gamer argues that "part of the method of the *Posthumous Poems* is to make Shelley's political reputation seem groundless and to portray his political enemies as vicious and gratuitous in their persecution of him" (225). The more saintly Percy appeared in print, the more diabolical the attacks on his legacy had to seem. Although one could quibble that a posthumous edition cannot be, strictly speaking, a re-collection on the grounds that it is not authorized, the chapter serves as a dramatic climax to the book and is otherwise continuous with its agenda and methodology.

Gamer's book deserves a wide audience in Romantic studies, poetics, and beyond. What it does feels genuinely new. It provides a method for doing something one did not realize one was missing: how to read individual collections of poetry as distinct art objects in their own right, formed in material and social conditions that may have differed from those of the poems when they were first written. It demonstrates how books can change the meanings of the poems they contain and redirect the framing of poets' careers.