Alistair Heys
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Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives
(Bloomsbury, 2010)
by Daisy Hay

THE MAIN PROBLEM with reviewing Daisy Hay's *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives* is the sheer volume of promotional hype that lauds her stylistic effervescence and which prevents a *tabula-rasa* reading of her work. Nevertheless the very best thing about *Young Romantics* would seem Hay's sparkle as a prose stylist. This glimmer is most noticeable when she finds just the right word to sum up a biographical situation and succeeds in preventing the reader's attention span from flagging, which in a book of 364 pages is something of a welcome relief. Her book is a polemic that locates urbane sociability as the stimulus for Romantic creativity and functions as a veritable quart of biographies poured into one pint pot. It is at once a multiple study of the lives of the Hunts, the Shelleys and Byron with a Keatsian chaser thrown in and one that proposes that male poetic egos write best in an atmosphere of friendly rivalry. The obvious question would seem whether she manages to find sufficient evidence for her premise that far from being isolated poets of brooding intensity, in actual fact, Byron, Keats, Shelley and Hunt were sociable types, who gregariously lived in each other's pockets and in particular from the beneficence of Byron and Shelley's wallets.

Her sociable argument would seem the complete opposite of Bloom, Hartman and Jonathan Wordsworth's slant on Romantic poetry: that inspiration sublimes thousands of feet above sea level, at what Frye identified as the highest-point of Beulah. If the general thrust of this down-to-earth positioning rebukes the mountainous wisdom of Zarathustra then Hay nowhere says so, despite the vase-shattering rhetoric of her dust-jacket blurb. According to her acknowledgements page, Hay is deeply indebted to Stillinger's *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of the Solitary Genius*, although this book concentrates more upon Wordsworth and Coleridge. Her affable anti-romantic-sublime argument evolves in this questionable fashion:

> Creativity for the first generation of Romantic poets was inherently solitary, since it stemmed from, and idealised, the genius of the individual spirit. Hunt's poetry subverted this model of Romantic individualism, and suggested that inspiration was located in communality.

The Prelude is addressed to Coleridge and *Lyrical Ballads* was a collaborative effort dominated by Wordsworth, moreover, the first generation can hardly be said to have a monopoly on sublime moodiness, as *Manfred* and *Mount Blanc* testify. Hay borrows freely from Roe's *Fiery Heart* and also from Holmes's *Shelley: The Pursuit*, not to mention sundry modern biographies of Byron. She writes an ambitiously expansive if semi-dependent kind of biographical criticism aimed at an educated lay audience interested in the social life of the

Romantics. This tendency is the book's great strength and, unfortunately, its most troubling weakness since her facility for finding champagne turns of phrase goes hand in glove with a gossipy grasp of matters that sometimes reads like an unconscious commentary upon her own *modus operandi*. For instance, the exquisite leitmotif for the book is Keats's Shakespearean "The web of our life is of mingled yarn, good and ill together," whereas the Hoppners are tellingly described as "compulsive gossipmongers." We learn that a local hotelier did a brisk trade in renting telescopes so that tourists could spy upon the washing drying outside Villa Diodati. Yet, the obverse of this prime example of Romantic dirty washing is the moralising antithesis that "*Frankenstein* condemns much of what Byron's *Childe Harold* represents: isolation, self-indulgence and an abnegation of social responsibility." Though whether Claire Claremont's behaviour where Byron is concerned is more radically irresponsible than Hay's gusto in perpetuating scandalous goings on is a moot point, a good example of the text's implicitly sensational tack being this Byronic kiss and tell: "if a girl of eighteen comes prancing to you all hours – there is but one way." Phrases like "scurrilous speculation" and "titillating gossip" abound when Hay describes the smoke-without-fire calumny stirred up against Byron by "his parallegrammatical princess, Annabella Milbanke". This said, the seriousness of Byron's cynical boast that he would personally corrupt Allegra when she was old enough is nicely balanced against his conservative excuse for sending their love child to a nunnery because he disapproved of the Shelleys' speculative religious opinions. On occasion there is a measure of poetic justice in this clothesline way of proceeding because Hunt, who had been imprisoned for calling the Prince Regent "a libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps," in turn found his *Rimini* attacked for his choice, that was repugnant to the Tory establishment, of Dante's Paolo and Francesca as subject matter. Thus, Cowden Clarke ineptly defended the poem on these grounds, "Suppose, Mr. Hunt… were a gambler, an adulterer, or a debauchee… what would all this have to do with the merits, or demerits of his poem?" What then does one's private life have to do with being Head of State or a Romantic poet?

Dirty linen provides Hay with many key psychological insights: "*Rimini* and *Parisina* suggest that Hunt and Byron found the presence in their households of Bess and Augusta intellectually stimulating and erotically suggestive." Scandal is grist for Hay's peppermill; hence, she coins a new word "smuggery," one defined by this excerpt from a diary kept by Haydon, who comments upon the almost incestuous relationship of Hunt and Bess: "he likes & is satisfied to corrupt the girl's mind without seducing her person, to dawdle over her bosom, to inhale her breath, to lean against her thigh & play with her petticoats". The besotted and therefore jealous Haydon is a remarkable instance of disgusted from Tunbridge Wells since according to Hay he had "convinced himself that Hunt, Byron, Shelley and Godwin were co-

conspirators in a plot to bring revolution to Britain, and that they were only thwarted because they 'shocked the country by their opinions on sexual intercourse'". Whether Byron or Shelley is worse in this respect is a point for debate, and Hay outlines Hogg's undoubtedly bisexual interest in Harriet Shelley thus, "Shelley and Hogg had some experience of sharing a woman before, although they had been hampered, in Shelley's view, by the deceitful way Hogg concealed his feelings for Harriet." Free love spills over into the chilling speculation that like Maud Gonne, who wished to resurrect the spirit of MacBride by conceiving a child on his grave, Mary Shelley entertained the notion that a necropolis could be erotic, "the discreet north-eastern corner of St. Pancras churchyard would have seemed an appropriate setting." The reaction of Shelley's wives to Hogg's unwanted advances is purloined from a scuttlebutt notebook recollection by Silsbee, "Claire had told him of Mary coming into her room and 'putting her head on her (Claire's) pillow & crying bitterly saying Shelley wants her to sleep with Hogg.'" Subjected to the Satanic School attack, Shelley's poetry could hardly have allayed conventionally right-wing suspicions that some sort of *ménage* had been occasioned between Byron and the Shelley circle because both *Laon and Cynthna* and *The Cenci* turn on the figure of incest. Hay notes that concerned friends censored his poetry; "hemming and cutting his verses so that they conformed to the hypocritical taboos of the society Shelley had sought to transform." Hay goes from radical tap-roots to the Romantic grapevine, and does so with great aplomb—the reader seldom snags upon Hay's immaculate prose style.

If the text strays into the Victorian realms of domestic minutiae, as in the announcement that Shelley was a hypochondriac, who made himself ill by eating too many Italian cakes, there is nonetheless a healthy amount of political commentary that lifts the text out of salacious tabloidesque preoccupations. Being sociable becomes in Hay's narrative a political stance in its own right and one that she claims protected against intrusive government espionage: "Hunt developed his conception of sociability as an oppositional idea, as an instrument for binding together individuals with shared ideals." Nor should we think of these radical gatherings as the exclusive preserve of male firebrands because Hay points out that Mary Lamb, Mary Novello and Bess Kent "were strong-minded women," who played an essential part in debates co-jointly stimulated by men and women. This is especially the case when posthumous reputations are considered; Hay produces more of her excellently figured eloquence to clout Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, a reminiscence that was received by contemporary reviewers as "the quintessence of Cockney vulgarity" and which caused him to be widely viewed as a "literary parasite"—rather than as the *soi-disant* "axis around which the great figures of the Romantic era revolved." Hay intelligently leaves open the question of whether Hunt was the central person of this panoply of Romantic geniuses and genuiesses, or just first among equals in the clique of radical acquaintances that Byron describes after visiting him in his florabundant

London gaol. The attack on his ex-paymaster would seem to indicate a late-fruiting rivalry between the male egos of Byron and Hunt; the scorner of a dependent and the resenter of charity, respectively. Hay generally displays the deft hand of the flower-arranger when treating the tragically tangled vicissitudes of these sometimes ephemeral, sometimes fiery friendships, though sadly, her last-page moral, "friendship is not always easy," feels trite.

In these ruminations on lurking bias, Hay encounters the twin antipodes of biographical art that either verges upon hagiography, or else descends into the pit of demonization. Mary Shelley played a key role in promulgating "Shelley as the voice of Romantic isolation," and this as a reaction against Hunt's notorious memoir that castigated his former patron and cast himself as the crucial figure of the Pisan circle. It was Mary who crystallised the Shelley myth – that of an idealistic poet addicted to an idiosyncratic sense of natural justice. In contrast, Claire Claremont penned a devastatingly bitter retrospective diatribe aimed at Byron and Shelley, "Under the influence of the doctrine and belief of free love I saw the two first poets of England… become monsters of lying, meanness cruelty and treachery". Yet, this poisonous piece of retributive scorn pales beside what is perhaps the root of Claremont's anguish: "Byron, in the spirit of absolute villainy, decided to convince Claire of her (Allegra's) demise by sending a goat in a child's coffin to England." Hay has a keen eye for the exaggerated difficulties faced by the women perverted by the bad, mad and dangerous to know, "now that the men of the group were dead… the women were left behind to count the cost of youthful idealism: damaged reputations, limited earning capacity, and exclusion from polite society." Ironically, Romantic friendship ended in a form of isolation.

All in all Hay deserves our plaudits for audaciously writing what is a highly readable multiple biography. That is the case even though to an unabashed connoisseur of Romantic poetry the speculative analyses of potential psychological motivations are trowelled on a little too thickly, at least in comparison to those close-readings of poems occasionally used to justify her sociable argument, as in the example of Shelley's urbane "Letter to Maria Gisborne". Such an emphasis raises the question of whether we read Byron and Shelley because they were brilliant poets, or for certain other more recondite reasons? I absolve Hay from blame in this respect since historicism is the spirit of the present critical age and biographical criticism always towards tittle-tattle tends, especially when a publishing deal is required. I end with an incestuous vignette that succeeds in linking the three male poets at the centre of the biography: "Byron (whose liaison with Augusta was still the subject of society whispers), Hunt (whose relationship with Bess had been discussed in reviews of *The Story of Rimini*) and Shelley, who had eloped with two sisters and was rumoured to be the author of *Epipsychidion*, a poem which, *Blackwood*'s noted, made reference to both 'sister' and 'spouse.'" The lesser problem with all this gossip is that rumour is a pipe blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures, and Hay seldom considers its authenticity.