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read
Romantic Literature
(York Notes Companions, 2010)
by John Gilroy

THIS BOOK IS PART OF THE SERIES York Notes Companions, published jointly by York Press and Pearson, and aimed at providing early-level undergraduate students with authoritative introductions to certain literary periods and movements, paying especial attention to the relations between the texts and the contexts in which they were produced. Hence, these handbooks 'combine accessibility with academic rigour, placing texts at the heart of every discussion and helping the reader towards a clear understanding of the connections between literature, history and culture'.[1] Following this practice, John Gilroy's *Romantic Literature* offers a comprehensive overview of 'the literature of an age of social and political revolution' (5). In order to do so, he discusses both canonical Romantic literary texts and some others that undergraduates are less likely to be acquainted with, allowing readers to gain an advanced understanding of the debates concerning Romantic literature and culture. After countless handbooks and companions to this period one might argue that there is no point in producing more volumes on a similar line, but Gilroy's work makes good the claim that books on such a topic still deserve publication. It is not the originality of its research that is at stake here, but how *Romantic Literature* can contribute to the improvement of the teaching and learning of Romantic-period topics and texts. Its conciseness, structure, and extended commentaries make it a very suitable companion for undergraduate courses. The vivacious and enthusiastic yet informative style of Gilroy's prose, combined with generous quotation from primary and secondary sources, makes *Romantic Literature* a rewarding read.

Gilroy's introduction to Romanticism unfolds over five parts and several chapters, each crammed with fascinating material. Each part is presented as running text, but with some chapters within Part Three ('Text, Writers and Contexts'), on genres, pamphlets, drama, verse and fiction; and in Four ('Critical Theories and Debates'), which structure the discussion around some central topics of the period. This organisation represents one of the strengths of the book, for it enables readers to use it not only as a companion but, despite its economy, as an encyclopaedia of sorts, perusing key entries and then setting the text aside.

In eight pages, Gilroy presents a brief yet comprehensive introduction (Part One), which emphasizes the diversity and wide range of the literature of the period. He aims at demythifying the stereotype of the Romantic writer-hero and explores the many different and contradictory 'Romanticisms' we may come across.

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[1] *York Notes Companions Website*. <http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/bookshop/subject.asp?item=9295&affid=675>.

In Part Two, Gilroy offers a cultural overview of the Romantic period. It is his contention that it is first important to have good knowledge of the history of a period not only for its intrinsic value but also as essential background to literary work (5). As Romantic literature 'reflects in innumerable ways the radical social and political upheavals of its age' (9), the author begins his line of reasoning with a concise account of the French Revolution and its aftermath, before offering an overview of the British political, social and literary reactions. A brief analysis of the role played by readers and publishers in the literature at the turn of the century is followed by an overview of the reformist attitude of the second generation of Romantic poets in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, and how class consciousness, especially as reflected in the works of Byron and Keats, had a negative effect on the reception and criticism of their later poetry. This interesting depiction of the period is, however, tarnished by a chaotic concluding section to Part Two, where Gilroy announces a focus on the issue of Romantic expatriates, but strays rather purposelessly from the topic.

Part Three is by far the finest achievement of *Romantic Literature*. In six chapters Gilroy analyses key Romantic texts and authors, offering at the end of each an extended commentary of one of the texts discussed. In the first two chapters, 'Writing in Revolution: Burke, Paine, and Wordsworth' and 'Revolution, Reaction and the Natural World: Wordsworth and Coleridge, Clare and Blake', Gilroy develops a text-oriented commentary on the literature produced in an age of social and political revolution, examining how it was in itself a literature that was in a state of revolution. Beginning with an overview of the pamphlet wars and the Revolution controversy in the 1790s, the author offers an interesting comparison between Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), to illustrate the different and sometimes opposite sides taken by writers and intellectuals. This chapter concludes with a commentary on a passage from *The Prelude* (1805) in the light of the Revolution controversy. Gilroy demonstrates how this controversy was reflected in the poetry of the Romantics, whose main concern eventually moved from revolution to the natural world. Exemplifying this in Wordsworth, Gilroy pursues a coherent line of development to the poetry of Clare and Blake.

The third chapter, 'Dramatic Writing: Walpole, Southey and Byron', places a valuable focus on the traditionally unexplored (in works of this kind) theatre of the Romantic period. Gilroy comments on the theatricality of all aspects of Romantic life before moving on to examine 'dramas which lent themselves more to being read than performed' (96). A critical overview of the Scottish Romantic dramatist Joanna Baillie's 'plays on the passions' is followed by a comprehensive account of how Horace Walpole was the initiator not only of the gothic novel, but also of the gothic drama, and a close analysis of his play *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), where Gilroy identifies some fascinating Shakespearean echoes. (Indeed, he frequently turns to Shakespeare for parallels with Romantic works.) Further, he focuses on a nowadays largely forgotten

dramatic work by Robert Southey, *Wat Tyler* (1817), in order to illustrate the political plays written in the Romantic period. Finally, Byron's *The Two Foscari* (1821) is used as the central text to exemplify the historical dramas produced in the period; Gilroy shows how the Romantics employed this genre 'as a means of circumventing censorship and displacing issues of national concern within different eras and contexts' (111).

In the three remaining chapters of this Part there is a gradual shift from poetry to prose. In chapter four, 'Romantic Verse Narrative: Keats, Shelley and Coleridge', Gilroy argues that the success of the Romantic verse narrative superseded that of the novel and even of descriptive poetry. Chapter five is on 'Romantic Fiction: Hogg, Peacock and Austen', and begins with an exploration of the importance of Romantic fiction for the later Victorian novel, focusing especially on the fragmented and divided self not only in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), but also in James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). While the author's subsequent analysis of the Romantic novel of comedy and transition is highly suggestive, the discussion on the Romantic satirical novel and Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) is crucial for the understanding of Gilroy's arguments throughout the book, as he will make use of Peacock's work in Part Four to illustrate key points. Chapter six, 'Romantic Travel Writing: Beckford, Byron and Wollstonecraft', then moves from the Romantic notion of 'wanderer' to that of 'pilgrim'.

One danger faced by works of this kind when they analyse central issues is that they may become a mere retelling of everything that has been written before on the subject. Nonetheless, even in 'Part Four: Critical Theories and Debates', Gilroy's work does not consist of a series of paraphrases from previous critics. His own interpretations, based on close readings, are accompanied by a re-evaluation of first-rate works by other Romantic scholars, thus providing readers with an invaluable general survey of the period and the literature written on it. Two highly suggestive chapters on 'Imagination, Truth and Reason' and 'Faith, Myth and Doubt', are followed by a re-examination of Romantic 'Heroes and Anti-Heroes', where the author provides a clear description of the construction and deconstruction of the concept of the 'Byronic hero', and the presence of the myth of Prometheus in Romantic writings, paying especial attention to *Frankenstein*. After this probing analysis, Gilroy's final chapter on 'Forms of Ruin' is something of a disappointment, since its cursory approach results in a rather feeble conclusion. That said, there is interesting material on the repercussions of the Elgin Marbles affair in the poetics of Byron and Keats.

Bearing in mind the scope and target readership of this companion, the apparatus to this book is very satisfactory. Gilroy's timeline in Part Five lists important historical and literary events of the Romantic era, and is followed by a superb section with suggestions for further reading. The annotated bibliography and information on online resources are particularly useful. The complete index covers most of the themes, authors and the texts discussed – a

useful feature considering the largely text-centred focus of this companion. If in general terms the reader's task is facilitated by the apparatus, there is nonetheless one minor drawback concerning references. The reader might at times find it difficult to locate which secondary source is being cited since in-text citations are not always consistent with any particular style. This is further complicated by the coexistence of footnotes and endnotes. Apart from the mere confusion stemming from the co-occurrence of these two, in spite of the fact that the former are devoted to clarifications and the latter to bibliographical references, references are sometimes included as well in the footnotes. One is inclined to blame this on the publisher, as it is probably the style of the York Notes Companions series.

All in all, Gilroy deserves our plaudits for a highly readable companion to British Romanticism, intended for early-level undergraduate students. We consider it important to stress this, because there would be no point in judging this work by other standards.[2] While not offering strictly speaking any new contributions or insights into the study of British Romanticism, Gilroy's *Romantic Literature* is an invaluable pedagogical tool for the teaching of Romanticism. Unlike many edited volumes, it makes it easier to establish the basis for a course on a historical and literary movement of such depth and complexity. In short, it is a perfect entryway into the study of Romantic literature for a student readership.

[2] The target reader of the brilliant Companions by Duncan Wu (*A Companion to Romanticism*. Blackwell, 1999), Nicholas Roe (*Romanticism:An Oxford Guide*. Oxford, 2005) and Stuart Curran (*The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*. Cambridge, 2010) is also the student of Romantic literature but at a higher level of education. Besides, they also aim at contributing new interpretations of essential terms and works.