Adam Walker[1]
reads
Coleridge the Mystic Poet
(Woodfern Publishing, 2011)
by Eric Wasilewski
and
Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poet and Revolutionary
(Pluto Press, 2015)
by Jacqueline Mulhallen

ERIC WASILEWSKI AND JACQUELINE MULHALLEN HAVE BOTH produced welcome studies into relevant, though often neglected, aspects of the poets they survey. In different ways, Wasilewski and Mulhallen challenge traditional readings by offering fresh historical and critical considerations and uncovering new aspects of the creativity of these canonical poets.

Wasilewski's *Coleridge: The Mystic Poet* is an engaging, bold analysis of three of Coleridge's most famous poems, "Kubla Khan," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Dejection: An Ode." Wasilewski examines their allusions, symbolism, and allegorical language to understand how Coleridge interpreted and incorporated Egyptian mythology into his "mysticism," which Wasilewski broadly defines as meaning "both hidden and esoteric" and "relating to the mysteries of other religions" (9). For his discussion of "Kubla Khan," Wasilewski relies heavily on David Beres's psychoanalytical reading and explores the poem's potential religious meanings by drawing connections between themes and figures of African mythology, such as the Osiris stories, as well as Neoplatonism. Though the author neglects many important texts (such as the travel writings of James Bruce, for example) which may have informed Coleridge's interest in African culture, he provides a fascinating argument as to why "Kubla Khan" should be read as a finished, completed text.

Furthermore, in his reading of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Wasilewski challenges the traditional Christian interpretation of the poem by taking its objects and characters as symbols for figures in Egyptian mythology. He writes that the albatross potentially represents the ankh, the Egyptian symbol for life, and that the woman in the skeleton ship may be read as Isis and Life-in-Death as Osiris. In his reading of "Dejection," the subjects of the poem, including the poet himself, are open to similar interpretations as Egyptian gods. If one accepts these often-far-reaching connections, the result is a provocative and enterprising reading of Coleridge's poems; however his broader claims often want further substantiation. Nevertheless, Wasilewski unites Coleridge's poems with compelling—though daring—analyses.

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Like Wasilewski's examination of Coleridge, Mulhallen's *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poet and Revolutionary* uncovers dimensions of Shelley as a political figure by re-examining his life in relation to his political thoughts and activism. The biography is not the first to address Shelley's politics. P. M. S. Dawson's *The Unacknowledged Legislator* (1980), Paul Foot's *Red Shelley* (1981), and Michael Scrivener's *Radical Shelley* (1982) pay similar attention to this aspect of Shelley's life. However, as Mulhallen observes, more material about Shelley's life and poetry has come to light since these studies, and a fresh look at Shelley's political life has been long overdue.

Mulhallen's biography also seeks to amend the tendency in scholarship to treat the political radicalism in Shelley's writings as an anomaly separated from his way of living. Scholars have often downplayed how radical Shelley's political ideas were and suggested that, because Shelley was an aristocrat who preferred not to work, he was no true revolutionary. While acknowledging Shelley's privilege, Mulhallen contests this portrayal and demonstrates how his relationships and actions reflected his radical advocation of equality across lines of sex and class. Mulhallen also outlines his rejection of England's ruling system. Shelley, she argues, sought to find a "middle way" by "rejecting his full inheritance, sharing what money he had, and mixing with journalists, doctors and other professionals rather than aristocrats" (xiii). Aiming to redeem Shelley as a political theorist, she structures the biography into five chapters, each focusing on his political motivations and concerns behind the movements of his life. A sixth and final chapter is devoted to the legacy of Shelley's life and writings.

Within the first chapter, we find Shelley's childhood aptly framed within the social-political context of Britain's Parliamentary reforms and the evolving response to the French Revolution. The political career of Shelley's father, Timothy Shelley, who was an MP active in the reforms, is also explored in relation to Shelley's upbringing. The elder Shelley groomed his son for a profession in politics, often requiring the future poet to make speeches practiced with appropriate oratorical gestures (15). Mulhallen examines Shelley's family history, background, and education between the years 1792 and 1811, a period which encompasses his early childhood and time spent at Eton and Oxford, and offers several informed conjectures about the probable events and circumstances that shaped Shelley during these formative years. William Godwin's *Political Justice*, which the notable scientist and physician James Lind prompted Shelley to read, became the starting point for his own opinions on social justice. Shelley's *The Necessity of Atheism* furthered Godwin's critique of England's political and religious ideology. Expelled from Oxford as a result of its publication, Shelley made a complete break with his old life.

In the following chapter, "The Lake District, Ireland and Devon: 1811–13," Shelley emerges into a poet within the political arenas of Britain. We find him attending debates at the British Forum and establishing relationships with like-minded philosophers, such as Godwin and physicians such as William Lawrence, whose French-materialist approach to medicine inspires Shelley to

write *A Refutation of Deism, On Life and On a Future State*. However, Shelley's misgivings about religion, specifically Christianity, is more nuanced than Mulhallen acknowledges. A consideration of Shelley's *Essay on Christianity* (probably written in 1815 but published posthumously by Mary Shelley), which positions Christ's Beatitudes as a potential foundation for social reform, would have made an intriguing counterpoint. Nevertheless, the strength of Mulhallen's study lies in her adroit use of historical context that brings alive the importance of Shelley's political work.

This chapter also deals with Shelley's marriage to Harriet Westbrook and his move to Keswick in 1811. Despite the older generation's disenchantment with political reform, Shelley had hoped to meet Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose early writings, influenced by the French Revolution, had inspired Shelley. He was only able to meet Southey, who conversed with him and allowed him access to his library. This interaction sparked a friendship, though Shelley found Southey's mind "too narrow" and conservative, and, as a result, each failed in his attempts to convert the other (40). Mulhallen also addresses Shelley's political campaigning in Ireland before his move to Devon and Wales in 1811, the mounting tension created by the Protestant Ascendancy, and Shelley's growing political convictions contesting past portrayals of Shelley as a squeamish and remote aristocrat. Shelley befriended workers, defended orphan and widows, and spent what money he had relieving poverty. In his *Address to the Irish People*, Shelley argues that "Nature never intended that there should be such a thing as a poor man or a rich one" (26).

The title of the third chapter, "Tremadog, *Queen Mab* and the 'Hermit of Marlow': 1813–18," takes its name from Tremadog, Wales and the poems Shelley published during this period. Tremadog, a model town designed by William Madocks with progressive social aims, proved in accordance with Shelley's political vision. He helped fund the town's successful establishment. Mulhallen also devotes a section to *Alastor*, emphasizing Shelley's argument that the life of poetry is deeply connected and necessitated by a corresponding political life, and to *Laon and Cythna*, giving attention to the socially radical speeches of Cythna, the poem's central character. However, concerning Shelley's poetry, Mulhallen focuses primarily on the biographical parallels and political relevance of the publications rather than the poetry itself, which left me wishing for more literary analysis.

The fourth chapter titled "Italy and Shelley's Annus Mirabilis" chronicles Percy and Mary's travels through Italy in 1819, the year which saw the publication of *Julian and Maddalo* and several shorter poems. Shelley's poetry became more prolific when he received news of the "Peterloo Massacre", to which he responded by writing his most famous protest poem, *The Mask of Anarchy*. One of the great virtues of this biography—seen especially in this chapter—is Mulhallen's ability to demonstrate how Shelley's political ideals are inextricably bound up with his poetry, a continuous connection which is the font and foundation of his creative process. This is particularly evident in

relation to political radicalism in *Prometheus* and *A Philosophical View of Reform*, where the abolishing of national debt, the standing army, and the nature of a wider religious and non-religious equality are critically examined.[2]

The author's expertise of Shelley's dramas yields an insightful perspective into the political inspiration for his political satire and drama.[3] The fifth chapter undertakes the work he produced during his last years, and shows how his ardor for reform was kindled as Shelley attempted to publish a "wholly political" volume of songs "destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers."[4] In this chapter, we find Shelley's poetical works examined in light of his *The Philosophical View of Reform* as well as his dramas, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant*, sparked by the Neapolitan Revolution, and *Hellas*, written to inform England about the struggle for Greek independence. Mulhallen also considers Shelley's unfinished work, *Charles I*, which she describes as "probably the first scene in English drama where the protagonist is the crowd" (124).

Mulhallen portrays a fascinating and thorough portrait of political England during Shelley's time and often leaves poetry to speak for its own significance within the socio-political context. The interdependence of his politics and poetry must commend this book to anyone who thinks poetry stands free of the political or the moral. If, on the one hand, Shelley declared that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, on the other he was willing to write to Thomas Peacock "Poetry to be very subordinate to moral & political science."[5] Mulhallen addresses these outward contradictions in her final chapter concerning Shelley's legacy by explicating Shelley's belief that the flourishing of poetry invariably accompanies the struggle for reform and liberation. Throughout, Mulhallen's prose demonstrates an awareness of past scholarship concerning Shelley's life, particularly how previous scholars might have been misguided or inclined to conjecture too far. She often acknowledges how others have interpreted some less-than-certain aspects of Shelley's life—such as Shelley's potentially homoerotic relationship with Thomas Jefferson Hogg or of the dubious hallucinatory incident in February 1814 that allowed Shelley to escape Tanyrallt without paying his debts—and is not hesitant to reconsider such events with new evidence and her own speculations.

Concerning this recent attention to Shelley's politics, Mulhallen recognizes Shelley's relevance in the recent film *We Are Many* (2015), a documentary about the 2003 international protests of the Iraq war, that opens with the final stanza of Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy*:

> Rise like lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number.

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[2] *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F. L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon UP, 1964), 665.

[3] For further discussion of Shelley's dramas, see Mulhallen's other work, *The Theatre of Shelley* (2010), the first full-length study of Shelley's plays.

[4] Ibid., 207.

[5] Ibid., 70–71.

> Shake your chains to earth like dew,
> Which in sleep had fallen on you;
> Ye are many, they are few.

Mulhallen's observation is perhaps even more salient today, since those lines have recently become the battle cry of Britain's Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn recited the poem to a crowd of nearly 12,000 in Glastonbury in the summer of 2017. In this way, Mulhallen and Wasilewski share a willingness to reconsider established poets and their work in light of their relevance today by offering new historical and textual analyses to long-recognized figures and texts within the Romantic canon.