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reads

From Gothic to Romantic: Thomas Chatterton's Bristol

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edited by Alistair Heys

OFTEN OVERLOOKED in the English Romantic canon, Thomas Chatterton is a fascinating and eclectic individual who has been overshadowed by his younger and more famous contemporaries; that is, until now. Alistair Heys's collection of carefully researched essays, from a team of Chatterton experts, brings to light the importance of the city of Bristol's influence on Chatterton 'the person' and Chatterton 'the poet'.

In his introduction, Heys sets forth the purpose of the collection, which is not merely to provide further analysis of Chatterton's poems or forgeries but, rather, to illustrate the 'Dialectical relationship between Chatterton and Bristol, oscillating between love and hate.' It is this dualistic and symbiotic relationship between poet and city that makes the 'marvelous boy' as much as he makes Bristol. And although there is a tension between Chatterton and Bristol (Heys claims that Chatterton detested the 'vulgar' of Bristol), in the end, he longs for the gothic city that he created and helped create him.

The first essay in the collection is Jonathan Barry's 'Chatterton, More and Bristol's Cultural Life in the 1760s'. Barry argues that Chatterton's desire to become famous 'outpaces' his creative output—which, of course, would be terminated prematurely with his death. When compared to fellow (and same-generation) Bristolian Hannah More, she is the more patient of the two poets in regards to the practice of poetics. While More is willing to devote the necessary time to honing her craft, Chatterton craves immediate and glorious frame and fortune; and, as a result, he is unwilling to hone his craft and patiently further his poetic career.

Another of Barry's compelling arguments is that More, through her own social standing, was able to move through Bristolian literary societies; Chatterton, on the other hand, could only dream of More's privileges because the only way for him to 'survive' artistically in Bristol was to accept the city's patrons' support. And the acceptance of artistic funding was something that Chatterton saw as 'charity' and that he deeply opposed. Barry goes on to argue that it is because of Chatterton's pride and refusal to accept donations, that he is 'forced' to leave for London and subsist as an artist, that he fails and 'mercilessly drowns'. Barry thus suggests that it is Chatterton's own insecurities that prevent him from flourishing in Bristol. Convincingly, Barry frames More and Chatterton within the contexts of Bristol literary life; however, I would have liked to have seen a more in-depth psychological analysis on Chatterton.

'A Rococo Poet for a Rococo City', by Timothy Mowl, does not treat Chatterton as an Augustan poet, let alone a prototypical or pre-Romantic; instead, Mowl claims that Chatterton is a Rococo poet analogous to the

Rococo-gothic architecture of Bristol. Mowl states that Bristol's unique style of architecture mirrors the Rococo-gothic element in Chatterton's poetry through its 'playful', 'gracious' and 'unauthentic medieval details.' Mowl transitions into the second half of his essay by drawing parallels between Chatterton and Keats, stating that the latter is also a Rococo poet through his negative capabilities. While Mowl's essay makes for notable reading, it is marred by its failure to connect Bristol's architecture to Chatterton and Chatterton to Keats. It would have been better to provide an in-depth analysis of either topic—the architecture and poet or Chatterton's influence on Keats—rather than attempting to join the two.

Similar to Mowl, Michael Liversidge elucidates how the gothic myth of Chatterton is deepened by painted portrayals of Bristol (specifically St. Mary Redcliffe church) and the poet. The Gothic-Romantic trope of pairing the city and the poet is an important focus of Liversidge's 'Romantic Redcliffe: Image and Imagination' because Bristol appears in Chatterton's poetry much the same in how Chatterton frames Bristol. Just as windows and light figure prominently in the Chatterton paintings of Wallis, Lewis and Ward to illuminate the life or death of Chatterton, the paintings of St. Mary's by Loicker, Rowbotham and Turner focus on the finite details of the church, whose foundations are medieval. According to Liversidge, these medieval underpinnings provide the basis for the medieval qualities in Chatterton's poems. Liversidge also discusses the landscape paintings of Girtin, Cotman and Christian where the 'softer' and spatial presentations of St. Mary's are shrouded in fog, imparting a certain Chatterton-like mystery to it. Liversidge impressively merges both poetic and artistic aspects, illustrating the connections between painting and poet with the church as intermediary.

Katherine Turner's essay 'Dr Viper's Monkey: Philip Thicknesse and the 'Chatterton Monument'' briefly examines the eclectic life of Philip Thicknesse, an ardent admirer of Chatterton who, on his property in Bath, had erected a stone monument to Chatterton. (Unfortunately, the monument has long since disappeared.) Thicknesse, who had the 'gift' of alienating and making enemies did just that with James Gillray, who in turn published an etching of Thicknesse and Chatterton. In the 1790 sketch, Thicknesse is depicted in the off-center of the frame, while just centered is a skeleton (representing Death) which appears to be swallowing the young poet whole. The cartoon Thicknesse spews 'slander' and 'libel' while the forger-poet is consumed by Death's appetite. As Turner explores, in striking at his antagonist Gillray cruelly merges the identities of poet and admirer, implying that both will be devoured, fat and diseased, by the final end—Death. Through Turner's essay, readers will gain an understanding of the bitterness of such personal attacks and how the unfortunate Chatterton was used as a scapegoat in the Thicknesse-Gillray quarrel.

Arguably the strongest essay in the collection is Alistair Heys's 'Visionary and Counterfeit'. Heys seeks to explicate Chatterton's influence on the first-

generation Romantics, honing in on William Blake and his masterpiece *Jerusalem*. At the beginning of his exposition, Heys frames the Romantic debate concerning Chatterton's 'worth' as a poet through the dispute between Blake and Wordsworth. While the former finds Chatterton's use of gothic motifs inspiring, the latter, somewhat dismissively, sees Chatterton as a 'tragic poet, cut down by suicide'. Heys argues in favor of a Blakean position, boldly claiming that Chatterton's *Bristowe* 'was an influence on Blake's *Jerusalem*'.

Heys's second claim is that Blake reads Chatterton 'for his Romantic genius', which is why he (Blake) interprets his forgeries as a kind of 'self-creation'. While Wordsworth and Coleridge borrow nothing from their younger contemporary, Heys asserts that Blake is the only Romantic who has the vision to perceive Chatterton's worth within British poetry. Approximately half-way through his essay, Heys shifts his focus from an analysis of Blake and Chatterton's respective poetics to a comparison of the gothic aspects of their work. The similarities are striking: Chatterton idolized Bristol's gothic architecture, just as Blake did with London's Westminster Abbey.

Mary-Ann Constantine's article '"Within a Door or Two": Iolo Morganwg, Chatterton and Bristol' compares Chatterton's life with that of the Welsh stonemason and poet Edward Williams. Like Chatterton, Williams wanted to try his hand at poetry and what better way than to first assume a new identity. Williams took the name 'Iolo Morganwg', a bastardization of his maternal surname in Welsh. And like his English counterpart, Morganwg produced a fabrication—of a version of medieval Glamorgan, a small parish in Wales. As Constantine discovers, the similarities between Chatterton and Morganwg continue beyond the fabrications with the engagement of the gothic element in their poetry as well as the fact that both men find themselves in London. Ironically enough, Southey admired Iolo, just as Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge appreciated Chatterton.

The final essay in this slim collection is 'The Death of Chatterton' by Nick Groom. Groom challenges the romantic notion of Chatterton's suicide, claiming that his death could have been an accidental overdose. While this thesis goes against the grain of Chattertonian scholarship, it does highlight the mythologizing that surrounds the poet, forcing the reader to stop and enquire into other possibilities regarding Chatterton's death. After all, there is no conclusive evidence as to the exact cause of death, only the circumstantial evidence of an intentional overdose.

While these essays probably will not provide the major revision in thinking needed to change Chatterton's status within the canon, they do achieve a radical re-reading of Chatterton the person and Chatterton the poet. Most of the essays, however, examine, in part, the role that Bristol played in the development of Chatterton. This, in turn, causes one to consider *how* a locale influences and shapes an artist's craft, and in doing so, they afford the reader a series of stimulating and discursive connections which challenge one's preconceived notions of Bristol and the marvellous boy.