
REVIEWS

Andrew Elfenbein. *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1999. 262p.

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In his 1995 study on *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge University Press), Andrew Elfenbein argued that the 19th-century reception of Lord Byron helped create and disseminate a lasting image of the “homosexualized” genius. In *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*, Elfenbein returns to the literary and cultural genealogy of this image with the question of “how genius and homosexuality came to be linked in the first place” (1). Central to Elfenbein’s argument in this engaging and highly informative study is the contention that the Romantic concept of genius itself relied on the idea of personal eccentricity, creative daring, and deviation from norms of not only social but especially sexual behavior: in other words, an intrinsic element of “queerness.” Arguing that 18th- and early 19th-century Romantic concepts of genius were implicitly associated with devious sexual behavior, often deliberately challenging contemporary codes of sexual propriety and gender roles, Elfenbein traces the processes by which the fiction of genius became an important trope for the representation of homosexual “identity,” and the perception of homosexual “character.”

Elfenbein’s introduction and first chapter — an interesting overview of the 18th-century cultural climate in which notions of effeminacy, genius, and homosexuality started to coalesce — provide a carefully conceived theoretical framework for the following collection of essays on individual figures and works. In six substantial chapters, the wide-ranging discussion of lesser-known figures such as Anne Damer and Anne Bannerman, semi-canonical writers William Cowper and William Beckford, and such literary giants as William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, illustrates convincingly the pervasive intersection between homoeroticism and the myth of genius, despite the fact that Elfenbein concentrates almost exclusively on the work of poets. Expanding and refining traditional analyses of genius that tend to gloss over lesbian history and achievement, Elfenbein’s study also attempts a more even-handed discussion of examples of lesbian as well as gay representation in the cultural history of genius and homosexuality.

It is important to note what Elfenbein does *not* do in this study: while never excluding the possibility of the homoerotic orientation of individual writers (of

whose erotic life we usually know surprisingly little), he does not engage in an emphatic “gay heroes throughout history” approach. In fact, Elfenbein is at his best when weighing individual close readings of the figures and texts of his gallery of male and female Romantic geniuses against essentialist historicist impulses to identify and recuperate gay and lesbian ancestors for the present. Juxtaposing the individualizing and the normalizing aspects of genius and gender socialization in such figures as Beckford and Cowper, or Damer and Bannerman, Elfenbein lays out the ways in which these writers were themselves ambivalent in their use of the rhetoric of “homosexualized” genius. For instance, while they sought to promote their own status as daring geniuses through homoerotic imagery in their work, Beckford’s unabashed complicity with an emerging consumer economy in *Vathek* and Coleridge’s reliance on a generous annuity reversed and contradicted their posture as autonomous geniuses. Likewise, Anne Bannerman chose to exploit the rumors of her lesbianism for her status as female genius, while Anne Damer countered scandalous accusations of sexual innuendo with a posture of the virtuous heterosexual aristocrat. These inconsistencies illustrate not only the paradoxical and sometimes ironic relationship between the concepts of the revered genius and the abject sodomite or sapphist, but also the contradictions inherent in 18th-century discourses of genius and an underlying cultural fascination with sexual and social expressions of excess and deviance.

I found the broad cultural range that informs Elfenbein’s study to be one of the most attractive aspects of this book. Together with very careful close readings of selected texts (among the better-known are Beckford’s *Vathek*, Cowper’s *The Task*, Blake’s *Milton*, and Coleridge’s *Christabel*), we also find incisive discussions of the 18th-century debates about consumerism, effeminacy and luxury; the relationship between the Burkean sublime and the conflicting gender models of civic and civil humanism; or the prejudices against female genius and the history of lesbian representation in pornography (as well as Bannerman’s and Coleridge’s departure from such models). Another important strength of *Romantic Genius* are the sometimes surprising connections Elfenbein makes between 18th-century literary history and some recent queer theory and Foucauldian scholarship on gender, which informs his own approach. For example, reading Blake’s *Milton* and the multi-gendered figure of Ololon against the grain of established views of Ololon as the stereotypical *femme sacrificielle* and Blake as a misogynist, Elfenbein finds in Blake a rather unlikely early theorist of gender performativity, whose complex mythological work already encompassed and transcended Butler’s much later questioning of gendered “identities.” In an interesting extension of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of homosexual panic in his chapter on William Cowper,

Elfenbein also develops an interesting “theory of suburban panic” (90), which “installed the structure of the closet at the middle-class suburban psyche” (89) and can be seen as an important backdrop for the 19th- and 20th-century history of heterosexism and homophobia. These passages are brilliant examples of the mutual illumination that can happen when gender theory meets literary history, and I would have wished for more discussions of this kind. Unfortunately, however, some possible further connections seemed to go unexplored. For example, Elfenbein’s theory of the domestication of male genius interestingly complements the work of scholars such as Nancy Armstrong, whose analysis of feminine domesticity models has pointed out important functions of gender images for middle-class ideals of behavior and the ideological formation of modern individualism. *Romantic Genius* left me curious as to how such seemingly unrelated gendered images of domestic angst and hope found in the figures of both the homosexualized genius and the self-sufficient moral woman might have prepared the well-known later association between the 19th-century Dandy and the New Woman.

As a study that turns to literary history to develop and further the separate projects of gay and lesbian cultural studies as well as queer theory, Elfenbein’s book serves as a stepping-stone into the cultural history of our own present. This thorough analysis of the myth of genius as an intrinsic and important part of the history of homosexual representation interestingly reverses its own trajectory, and delegates the representation of homosexuality as an “identity” with a history to the realm of rhetorical tropes. *Romantic Genius* thus contributes to ongoing scholarship on rhetorical and historical formations of homosexuality and its attendant theorizations of queerness. Both scholars of British Romanticism as well as readers of queer theory and gay and lesbian literary and cultural history will find this study eminently useful and thought-provoking. ✨