
Larry H. Peer and Diane Long Hoeveler, eds. *Romanticism: Comparative Discourses*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. 208p.

TROY URQUHART
MONTVERDE ACADEMY

Beginning with an acknowledgement that any attempt to pigeonhole what is meant by the term “Romanticism” is, at the very least, problematic, this collection of insightful essays presents itself as an exploration of “the multiplicity and polyvalent quality” of Romanticism (1). Even the Foucauldian framework of discourse criticism which the editors construct in the book’s introductory chapter is a loose one, one which not only acknowledges but also relies on the ideological position of both the Romantic writer and the contemporary critic. The resultant volume is a collection of voices organized into three parts, each of which represents “one of the various fault-lines” (3) that runs through the discursive field known as Romanticism: “Language and Romantic Discourse Systems,” “Women Writers and Romantic Constructions of Power,” and “Varieties of Revisionist Discourse in Romanticism.”

In the first of these sections, Diane Long Hoeveler and Sarah Davies Cordova’s exploration of gothic opera and its role in the construction of the ideas of citizenship is nicely complemented by Marjean D. Purinton’s “Romantic Drama and the Discourse of Criminality.” Where Hoeveler and Cordova’s essay focuses on the ways in which the gothic novel makes its way to the stage and the ways in which the discourse surrounding it function in the construction of nationality, Purinton’s essay examines another stage—the space of the scaffold—connecting the removal of the spectacle of criminal punishment from public view with the Romantic focus on criminality’s psychology. Separating these two essays is another pair of complementary works: Richard A. Nanain’s “Pursuing the Plerotic Sublime: Romantic Poetry and the Failure of Language” and Onia Vaz’s “Half-asleep on Thresholds: Fragile Boundaries in Coleridge’s ‘Fears in Solitude.’” Nanain examines language at its limits, the “poetry of nothingness” and the “poetry of everythingness” (37-38), searching for moments in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge where the poetic language acts as a reference for “that which has exceeded the mind’s power to grasp and submit to analysis” (43). Vaz explores the Romantic fascination with the dissolution of categories, presenting Coleridge’s “uneasy relationship between solitude and activity” (61) not as vacillation, but as the hovering of the poetic imagination on the threshold of contraries (66).

The collection’s second section, which focuses on the discourse of power and on the attempt by women to negotiate their position within that discourse, begins with Nancy Metzger’s “Towards Constructing a ‘Poetics of Space’ for the Sentimental

Novel: A Topo-analysis of Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House*." Metzger's essay delivers exactly what it promises: a reading of Smith's 1793 novel in the terms of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, an approach which Metzger problematizes slightly in her conclusion. Other essays in this section include Carolyn A. Weber's examination of Mary Wollstonecraft's association of Islam with Protestantism in "ensouling" women, Kari Lokke's exploration of Romantic women as both poet and audience, and Larry H. Peer's analysis of Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*. Of particular note in this section is "Ithuriel's Spear and Detecting the Counterfeit: Edgeworth's Miltonic Allusions in *Belinda*" in which Jeffrey Cass argues against the tendency of critics to follow Gilbert and Gubar's reading of Edgeworth's *Belinda*, which Cass contends is a misreading of both Milton and Edgeworth.

In the collection's final section, the essays focus on the revisionist discourse of the Romantic period. Bonnie J. Gunzenhauser's "Readerly Agency and the Discourse of History in *The Antiquary*" examines Scott's novel as a work which recognizes the limitations of professional historians and subsequently demonstrates to "his readers how to practice history for themselves" (157). Rodney Farnsworth's "Reading Beyond Body, Cane, and Crosier: Talleyrand as Romantic Discourse" examines the legacy of the Romantic metaphor of the body, finding that "Tallyrand participated in a crucial form of Romantic mediation between the excesses of order and chaos" (176). The third essay in this section is "Byron and *Manfred*: Epistolary Journal into Dramatic Poem," in which D.L. Macdonald defends Byron's claims that the source for *Manfred* was the journals he kept during his 1816 tour of the Swiss Alps and not, as many have claimed, Goethe's *Faust*. The final essay of this section, completing the collection, is Sonja E. Klocke's "The Romantic Artist on the Couch: A Freudian Approach to Wackenroder's Musician, Berglinger." Klocke's analysis focuses not on Wackenroder, but on Berglinger, arguing that Berglinger, who represents the ideal Romantic artist, "is determined by an unsolved oedipal conflict" (192).

The editors of this collection candidly acknowledge that "any new volume of essays on Romanticism needs to justify itself fairly strenuously" (2), presenting this collection as an attempt "to carve yet more letters on the large tree of literary productivity" (6). As such an attempt, it is certainly a success, gathering a meaningful collection of voices. Indeed, perhaps the largest complaint we might lodge with this volume is its subtitle: "Comparative Discourses." There is no comparison here, no master narrative which attempts to dictate our reading of these essays. Instead, we find a collection of discourses, and it is this collected—rather than comparative—nature of this volume which makes it true to its stated aim, to explore "the multiplicity and polyvalent quality" of Romanticism (1). ✱