

Madeleine Callaghan, *The Poet-Hero in the Work of Byron and Shelley*. London: Anthem Press, 2019. Pp. 240. £70. ISBN 9781783088973.

Classical epic poetry from the tradition of Homer retains a view of heroism as the status of fame achieved through heroic deeds in war or in the battle against the Olympian gods. Avid readers of the classics, Byron and Shelley were surely familiar with such notions of heroism. Throughout their works, both Byron and Shelley present a constant preoccupation with, if not anxiety over, the struggle of poetic language to become heroic and achieve the status of deed. If heroic power is 'sought and won through language' (2), Madeleine Callaghan scrutinizes in her book versions of the poet-hero in Byron and Shelley as a means 'to meditate how the poet might be fitted to engage with, change and re-create the world, or become its victim' (3). Building on Charles E. Robinson's contention that Byron was a student of Shelley and vice versa, Callaghan's study regards the Byron-Shelley poetic conversation 'as a synergetic relationship where the poet-hero [...] develops through the artistic interchange between the two poets' (3).

In a reading of Cantos III and IV of *Childe Harold*, Callaghan advances Byron's 'shaping of a theory of poetry' (20) that merges the self in the world through a self-mastery of poetic language. While in *Manfred* Callaghan sees a Byronic inability to control poetic language in its attempt to define the world, in *Beppo* Callaghan illuminates the Byronic casting of the poet-hero as a commentator, or 'a one-man Greek chorus' (33), to convey the political message of the dramatic poem. In *Marino Faliero* Callaghan focuses on Byron's privileging of the philosophical over the emotional 'to craft a drama obsessed with the problem of words' (42), in order to test its use and abuse, 'forcing all language [...] to take centre-stage as the site of power-struggle' (39). Looking at *Cain* and *The Deformed Transformed*, Callaghan suggests that Byron was wary of the very possibility of 'a unified or total hero' (57). From the example of Cain's iconic struggle with language, Callaghan notes the Byronic interest in language as a means 'towards self-consciousness' (60) and the relationship between word and meaning. By contrast, Matthew Arnold overlooks these linguistic complexities and aspires to the 'wrong heroic paradigm [...] unavailable if desirable to mortals' (85). Callaghan concludes that in *Don Juan* and 'Epistle to Augusta' Byron 'approaches the problem of authority by creating a poet-hero out of the self' (87), which signals the 'cast of his poetic legend' (87) beyond the biographical.

Following the chapters on Byron, Callaghan offers a compelling interchapter on the poetic dialogism between Byron and Shelley in *Julian and Maddalo* and *The Island*. Arguing that these works explore the possibilities and limits of poetry, as well as 'the ends and aims of poetic heroism' (105), Callaghan is sensitively alert to the artistic exchange between Byron and Shelley in these poems. Effectively, both poems 'record their [of Byron and Shelley] own failure, and the failure of one another' to desire the status of poet-hero, although 'neither can claim its laurels' (122). The Shelley chapters present Callaghan's discussion of the poet-hero in the Shelleyan opus with an initial reading of Shelley's attempt to theorise the possibilities and limitations of language in *A Defence of Poetry*. Contending that, for Shelley, language must seek the eternal, Callaghan claims that Shelley fashions the poet-hero as 'based on the demands of his [prophetic] vocation' (125) for poetry to transcend the eternal and temporal in *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Mask of Anarchy*. Alternatively, in *Laon and Cythna*, Callaghan underpins Shelley's 'self-imposed epic task' to create poet-heroes as agents of social change 'effected through the aesthetic beauty of language' (147). The prophetic and political agenda endemic to the Shelleyan conception of the poet-hero gains, Callaghan notes, an existential and personal hue in Shelley's late works. On the one hand, in *Epipsychidion* Callaghan outlines Shelley's interest

in ‘rendering a poet-hero’ heroic ‘in an existential sense’ (170) by constructing a poem that ‘self-consciously tests the limits of poetic creation’ (170). On the other, Callaghan discloses Shelley’s imaginative efforts in *Adonais* to ‘interrogate its ability to accommodate two poet-heroes’ (191). As Callaghan demonstrates, Shelley’s elegy mourns for Keats’s death and praises his poetic deeds but, simultaneously, dismantles its own Keatsian figure through an ‘impulse to centre [Shelley’s] memorializing persona’ (191). For Callaghan this is illustrative of Shelley’s design to ‘provide consolation and transcendence’ in his poem as well as an attempt ‘to expose and refigure the elegiac mode’ (192). Callaghan’s reading of the complexities that inhabit Byron and Shelley’s conception of the poet-hero provides a compelling conceptual work of Byronic and Shelleyan aspiration, although often anxious, to render poetic language as deed. Such a study reconfigures our understanding of Romantic poetry and will exert a lasting influence on generations of students and scholars of Romantic literature.

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