

Carla Pomarè, *Byron and the Discourses of History*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 192. £55. ISBN 9781409443568.

Carla Pomarè's new monograph, *Byron and the Discourses of History*, is part of a wave of recent work in Byron studies that explores the poet's historical concerns, also including the work of Stephen Cheeke, Jane Stabler and the recent essay collection *The Place of Lord Byron in World History* (reviewed in the last issue). Pomarè's unique contribution to this debate is to place Byron's eager appropriation of historical accounts within the context of broader intellectual developments in Romantic historiography. At the time Byron was writing, history was undergoing something of a revolution: Edward Gibbon's scrupulous, sceptical and sometimes scurrilous interrogation of sources in his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1775-89) marked a broader movement in Western historiography; away from Christian teleology, and towards the more empirical practice exemplified by the work of the German positivist historian Leopold von Ranke. As Pomarè observes, Byron and his work have a complex status within these developments. In keeping with such historians' emphasis on empiricism, Byron stressed '[a]uthority and accuracy' (4), insisting that he kept to the facts in his representations of historical places and situations. At the same time, by reproducing in his notes extensive passages from historians as varied as Tacitus, Sismonde de Sismondi and David Hume, Byron demonstrates a 'collector's approach to history' (11) that partakes in the same antiquarian, bibliophilic fascination with historical anecdote exemplified by the popularity of miscellanies such as Isaac D'Israeli's *The Curiosities of Literature* (1791-1834) (itself a favourite of the poet's).

In her careful and conscientious attention to both Byron's extensive reading and the paratextual material that he and sometimes his creative partner John Cam Hobhouse fashioned to accompany the poet's poems and plays, Pomarè demonstrates effectively the interpretative complexity created by the poet's incorporation of other voices into his texts. In Chapter 3, for instance, Pomarè argues convincingly that '[a]lthough his tragedies are commonly read as a decisive contribution to the...popular nineteenth-century perception of the [Venetian] Republic as a site of secrecy and repression...the eclecticism of his sources' ensure that 'Byron's position is more nuanced' (81). In a particularly persuasive passage, Pomarè points out the creative debt that Byron's scholarly and sardonic annotations owe to the French philosopher Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1695-1702; Eng. Trans. 1709), a biographical dictionary with voluminous footnotes. Pomarè explains incisively how Byron's promiscuous use of quotation undermines his quest to reproduce historical reality, observing that 'his use of the intertexts of history qualifies in a very modern sense the drive towards historical objectivity that lies behind his interest in historical matters' (87).

Of course, one of the main difficulties that a study of this nature confronts is the extent to which the theoretical complications caused by Byron's inclusion of these sources are the result of accident or design. Pomarè claims that Byron was engaged in the 'painstaking tracing of the process tying events, documents and historical representations' (7), but was nonetheless 'fundamentally unbothered by methodological considerations' (4). But Byron's faith in the factual status of historical narrative reveals more than simple naivety. Byron highlights his own accuracy partly to underscore his personal acquaintance with the places he describes, and thereby to distance his work from the bookish Oriental epic verses of his *epic renegade* Robert Southey, to which – in their combination of exotic subject-matter and extensive paratexts – they bear an otherwise more than passing resemblance. Byron's emphasis on the facts also opens up interesting questions about his work's relationship with genres emerging in the period that blended fiction and fact, such as the historical novel and the National Tale. Not only did these new forms lay the foundation for Victorian realism, but

– through the massive popularity of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels, in particular – they played a significant role in disseminating national consciousness across the globe.

From his adoption of the Greek cause in Canto II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812) to his valorisation of nascent Italian nationalism in works such as *The Prophecy*, Byron’s works helped spread the idea that the nation was the central organizing principle around which the miscellaneous remnants of the past could be arranged into a coherent narrative. In her references to Byron’s involvement with the Carbonari towards the end of this book, Pomarè hints at these considerations, but she neglects to provide a fuller examination of Byron’s role in the rise of nineteenth-century ‘national’ history. This is a disappointing oversight in what is otherwise a conscientious study that should nonetheless prove of considerable interest to students and readers interested in Byron, Italian Romanticism, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiography.

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