

Martin Priestman, *The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened Spaces, Romantic Times*. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 308. £70. ISBN 9781472419545.

Erasmus Darwin has several times appeared as a member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, that extraordinary constellation of physicians, industrialists, inventors, chemists and natural historians of the Enlightenment. He was a polymath if ever there was one, and Priestman quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's description of him as 'the everything, except the Christian! Dr Darwin possesses, perhaps, a greater range of knowledge than any other man in Europe, and is the most inventive of philosophical men' (224). He was a reformer in his political beliefs, one who abominated slavery and approved of the American Revolution and, at least in its early stages, of the French Revolution. He was the author of three extraordinary book-length poems, *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791), and *The Temple of Nature* (1803), which, as Priestman shows us, were almost four. Those poems, enlisting imagination under the banner of science, present natural history, especially botany but also and significantly the history of the earth, human history and a theory of evolution that was perhaps more important for his grandson Charles than is generally acknowledged. Along the way, in the body of the verse and in detailed prose footnotes, he presents a materialism akin to that of Lucretius, Darwin's principal model, a political philosophy, a cosmos with its own mythology, a theory of knowledge, and much besides.

Priestman tackles Darwin head on, which means that the reach of his scholarship has to match a good part of Darwin's polymathy; he succeeds, thanks to wide ranging and careful readings, in poetry and prose, in the history of the natural and human sciences, and in the social and political history of the late eighteenth century. He concentrates on the three big poems, along with the previously unpublished and abandoned 'substantial fragment-poem on *The Progress of Society*' (3). He indicates that not much is known about the latter, and remedies the situation by not only weaving an account of the writing of that poem into the core of his argument, but also by publishing a very useful edition of it as Appendix A. He provides clear summaries and guides to these four poems, and he treats them *as* poems as well as contributions to varied debates of the day. He shows how Darwin's poetical techniques work, for example where he demonstrates that his 'fundamental building block ... is the rigorously end-stopped Popeian heroic couplet', which 'is the perfect vehicle for moving rapidly between diverse fields of knowledge' (37). He shows how the engravings illustrating the poems really contributed to them, and his interpretation of those engravings (some by Fuseli engraved by Blake) reinforce his reading of the texts. And, as part of his interpretative apparatus, Priestman uses Foucault's distinction between synchronic and diachronic accounts – the former representing spatial arrangement, as in gardens and Linnaean botany; the latter suited to developments through time, as in cosmology and evolution.

Historians have given us accounts of the English and Scottish Enlightenments; Priestman argues firmly for a *British* Enlightenment, in which Darwin, with his robust scepticism and radicalism, is a key figure, as we can see from the diagram of Darwin's networks (16). He was a founder of a Radical political society in Derby, his radicalism was apparent in his poems (especially *The Loves of the Plants*), and it was to prove both courageous and dangerous. In the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent execution of King Louis, expressions of sympathy with France and democracy, and of philosophical and scientific ideas derived from France, were sometimes met with prosecution for sedition and even treason; capital punishment was a real threat, and gagging bills worked to suppress free speech. Priestman devotes a chapter

to politics. He also has a chapter on myths, which Darwin treated as *scientific* allegories. Darwin was a Freemason, and perhaps had links to Rosicrucianism; he connected myths to scientific materialism, 'a world where a lusty paganism is alive and well' (167).

Darwin was a man of the Enlightenment, but one important for Romanticism; Priestman shows that most of the best-known Romantic writers borrowed from Darwin. He makes a case for Blake's indebtedness; he shows how Coleridge and Wordsworth were both influenced by and reacting against Darwin, whose verse had a massive influence on Shelley; and he connects Darwin to later Romantics and women poets.

Priestman has written a wide-ranging and cogent account of the Enlightenment underpinnings of Darwin's verse. He deserves a wide readership among students of English literature, Enlightenment culture, and the history of science.

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