

**Heather J. Jackson, *Those Who Write for Immortality: Romantic Reputations and the Dream of Lasting Fame*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 294. ISBN 9780300174793.**

*Those Who Write for Immortality* is a quietly provocative, timely, but ultimately frustrating study of those whom we now consider ‘Romantic’, and why. It invites us to consider some useful and challenging propositions about the Romantic canon and the aesthetic, political, social, and, perhaps most importantly for Jackson, pragmatic reasons for its crystallization into the ‘Big Six plus Austen’ formulation; about the management of Romantic afterlives; and about the various factors at play – most of them beyond the conscious control of the author – which govern how posthumous fame is granted. The fundamental questions Jackson asks are not small: What is this thing we call Romantic literature, and how did it come to assume its present dimensions and meanings? Should we study ‘it’, or does the field require a rethink?

The book, inevitably, struggles to properly address these issues, but in doing so it nevertheless provides a timely reminder, as Romantic studies shows signs of turning away from the historicist mode which has dominated criticism for the past two decades, of the forces that determine literary ‘immortality’ beyond questions of merit. Jackson makes her argument through a series of comparisons between the ‘winners in the Romantics’ immortality stakes’ and those who ‘failed’: Wordsworth versus Southey and Crabbe; Austen versus Scott and Mary Brunton; Keats versus Leigh Hunt and Barry Cornwall; Blake versus Clare and Robert Bloomfield (29). Literary immortality, for Jackson, means being read, and studied, and known of, now, not only by specialists in the academy, or even students, but by a general readership. This last audience is important, and explains why she considers Southey, Scott, Hunt, and Clare – four authors whom most Romanticists would not consider lost or unheard of – to have failed to achieve the lasting fame she seeks to interrogate.

Jackson is also clear that this is a study intended for ‘readers outside the academy’ as well as (or arguably instead of) those in it, and it’s difficult to know to what extent we should take this claim at face value (xii). Certainly the relaxed, fluid, occasionally chatty style seems to indicate this wider audience, although the clarity and directness of Jackson’s prose, which wears its knowledge extraordinarily lightly, would be equally welcome in any academic text. This general audience might also explain why the Romantic canon that Jackson wants to re-examine is one that, in 2015, following the recovery work of feminist and historicist criticism, some Romanticists might question. Jackson is interested in why, for example, Blake’s works ‘are widely loved, read, and recognized’, and in tracing why Austen and Wordsworth have accreted their respective cultural industries, rather than in what, and who, receives critical scholarly attention (168). However, the questions about Romantic fame and afterlives she poses seem, to me, ones that the discipline has been attempting to get to grips with for some time now, whether through work on reception, readership, and the publishing industry, on the role of biography and memorials, or on nineteenth-century cultural tourism, and in this way the study acts as a survey of various concerns that appear academic rather than general.

Jackson does an efficient job of showing how a wide range of factors including sufficient range to appeal to changing literary fashion, perceived appropriateness for school curricula, association with a marketable location, and a good biography and letters or other literary remains combine to ensure longevity for some and obscurity for others. She neatly punctures the views of Wordsworth and Southey, in particular, that lasting fame was a matter within the author’s control, and gives short shrift to the idea of literary merit; thus she will not say that Keats is absolutely a better poet than Hunt or Cornwall: ‘his work enjoys almost universal approval and has done for a long time now’, but ‘judgements of quality depend on

the criteria applied', and were we to 'obliterate the critical heritage of the nineteenth century and begin again', we might get a different outcome (162). There's no vantage point outside culture and history from which we might make any kind of truly objective assessment, of course, which is Jackson's point. However, in the absence of any sustained close reading in the study, and not much in the way of quotation, such claims are difficult to follow. Jackson argues, for example, that Mary Brunton was experimenting with free indirect discourse at the same time as Austen, but offers no examples. Despite the frustrations of its not-quite-academic not-quite-general nature, however, the study is ultimately a valuable invitation to continue rethinking the Romantic canon and the processes that determine it.

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