

Marilyn Butler, *Mapping Mythologies: Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry and Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xxv + 214. £24.99. ISBN 9781107116382.

For a study of eighteenth-century literary historiography, antiquarianism, and nationalist myth-making, the conditions under which Marilyn Butler's *Mapping Mythologies* finds its way into publication are neatly fitting: discovered among her papers by friends, the typescript, composed in 1984, is precisely the kind of 'found text' around which several of the writers in this study weave literary and editorial works – Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, Chatterton's forgeries, and William Owen Pugh's anthologies, to name but a few. Yet, if anarchism typically marks such texts, perhaps the most surprising thing about *Mapping Mythologies* is how contemporary it sounds. Following an 'era of aggressively historicist critique' in the 1990s leading to what David Collings has identified as 'the modest tone of recent work in Romantic studies' (*College Literature* 28.2 (Spring, 2001); 207), Butler's book, though certainly focused on social and literary history, makes a bolder intervention into prevailing thought on eighteenth-century culture than is common in our own, somewhat more cautious time.

Part of the reason the text ages so well stems from what are, in another sense, limitations. Butler does not perform a detailed survey of extant scholarship on myth and related subjects, choosing instead to identify a handful of major studies by Frye, Abrams, and Bloom against which to establish her own approach to literary tradition and influence. Thereafter, the focus turns to a range of eighteenth-century writers and thinkers in an effort to sketch the social and political tensions in British literary culture. Elaborating on Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities', Butler investigates how eighteenth-century mythical worlds (presented as) indigenous to Britain 'come into being as an ideal yardstick against which to measure other equally fanciful ways of constructing the nation', as foundations for an 'alternative to the present order' which is prone to limit terms like 'society' to 'the upper orders living in the capital' (20). Butler illustrates how eighteenth-century debates surrounding myth were also always debates about professionalisation, national identity, oppositional politics, geography (town versus country), and class.

Butler recontextualises and revises the standard reception of several important poets – Thompson, Gray, Collins, Young, and Akenside – and investigates the impact of inspired forgers like Macpherson and Chatterton on the cultural establishment in London. Contrary to earlier dismissals of the latter, Butler argues that 'between them these two writers represent the impatient inventive impulse underlying eighteenth-century literature at their geographical and historical extremes' (112). The book terminates with Blake, an artist whose work often feels as if recovered from somewhere in the depths of Albion's past; in her final chapter, Butler demonstrates convincingly how 'Blake's eccentricity and unintelligibility have often...been exaggerated...because most of those writing about him have a view of eighteenth-century literature which excludes his most natural context, the tradition of popular mythologising' (187).

But before turning to Blake, Butler devotes a long, fascinating chapter to 'Popular Antiquities'. This chapter explores not only a series of individual antiquarians but traces the organisation of knowledge as it consolidates into a form of historiography that challenges 'the first great classic period in England of linear historiography, or metahistory' (127). 'Popular antiquarians were early social historians and social scientists' working at a time when these sciences were still formulating their internal methodologies and differentiating themselves from each other (124). To tell this story of the rise of, in essence, cultural studies 'what is needed...is

a more particularised and, in the end, a more conflicted set of histories – less linear and, as Foucault puts it, more genealogical’ (125). Butler’s chapter thus begins to mirror her topic: just as the ‘procedure of the antiquarian’ involved the “collection” of artefacts or of data, rather than the development of an individual authorial point of view’, so the chapter itself collects together ‘a rich disorder and diversity’ of people who fall outside the acknowledged institutions of learning but who share a deep interest in history as something that might permeate and haunt material, cultural objects from the past (127, 128).

Mapping Mythologies is an engaging if somewhat uneven book. Chapters on a cadre of poets working in the mythological mode lay out the social tensions between these writers and literary authorities in ways that can seem, at times, insular and curatorial. Yet, chapters on forgery and popular antiquarianism are rich and – oddly – timely, offering insights to contemporary scholars of the Gothic, Romantic historiography, and media studies. The chapter on Blake is too brief to do much beyond placing him at the end of a sequence, although that in itself is helpful. The index, finally, is sadly limited and would benefit from expansion to include, as a start, concepts such as ‘country’, ‘Gothic’, ‘historicism’, ‘influence’, ‘mediation’, ‘nationalism’, ‘professionalism’, and ‘Renaissance’.

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