

**Beatrice Turner, *Romantic Childhood, Romantic Heirs: Reproduction and Retrospection, 1820-1850*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. xv + 245. £79.99. ISBN 9783319649702.**

Apropos of ‘Romantic literature’s intense ‘aesthetic and psychic investment’ (32) in the child, this book takes on the moot ontological question of what being a “child” of Romanticism’ (xv) might mean. Turner focuses on the writerly voices of four such children in both a ‘literal and literary’ (1) sense: Coleridge’s children, Hartley and Sara, and Godwin’s children, Mary Shelley and William Godwin Jr. The book shines a critical spotlight on the bulk of these children’s literary production through 1820-1850, in terms of their unpicking of their ‘close implication in their fathers’ texts’ (4).

This enquiry proceeds through the governing metaphor of ‘writing back’ (2), signifying ‘the appropriation of linguistic power’ (3), in a phrasal borrowing from writer Salman Rushdie’s battle cry for the radical imperative of decolonisation. Turner contends that the four children write back to concurrent – if seemingly antithetical – formations of Romantic-era childhood – the ‘totemic’ (25) Romantic child exemplified by Coleridge, and the older Enlightenment child associated with Locke, predicated on the conception of the infant’s mind as a *tabula rasa*. Hartley appears to perform a ‘willed rejection’ (57) of Coleridge’s tendency to prize his firstborn when ‘passive, silent, and written or read’ (59) as in ‘Frost at Midnight’; Hartley’s poem ‘To a Deaf and Dumb Little Girl’ can be read as an exposé of the ‘representational violence’ (88) in poeticising a subject unaware of the hermeneutic politics enacted. Sara’s (mostly unpublished) poetry presents a narrative of an active and athletic girlhood, mirroring Wordsworth’s ‘imaginative ownership’ (121) of the landscape. Turner postulates that the Godwin children interrogate their father’s (Lockean) privileging of the family constituted through ties of sympathy rather than feudal ‘claims of blood’ (17). Turner scrutinises the novels *Matilda* (1819), *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837), where Shelley varies a basic plot pattern of daughters educated by fathers in circumstances of social isolation. Such pre-scripted roles lead to the disastrous incestuous dynamic in *Matilda*, while the daughters in *Lodore* and *Falkner* escape similar fates only through their marriages and ‘creation’ (172) of a new ‘biological nuclear family’ (174). Contrapuntally, ‘blood calls to blood’ (191) in the fiction of Godwin Jr.; in the posthumously-published novel *Transfusion: or, the Orphans of Unwalden* (1835), Turner reads the orphaned brother’s performance of a quasi-spiritual process of transfusion on his sister as a Romantic incest fantasy, framing this within the ambient biomedical discourse and proprietorial politics of blood transfusion, as paralleled in emergent vampire literature.

Theoretically, Turner’s treatment of ‘writing back’ reconsiders Harold Bloom’s psychosexual model of the anxiety of influence, hypothesising that these Romantic children respond to ‘an anxiety not of influence but of reproduction’ (4) of the overweening author/father, and are troubled by the ‘absence’ of the ‘maternal creative impulse’ (219). Hartley’s self-portraits in his poetry are structured through profoundly mortifying ‘images of littleness, frailty, and reproductive failure’ (58), he is ‘the loved abortion of a thing designed’ (79). Sara lays claim to a paternal inheritance through a bodily self ridden, like Coleridge’s, with perpetual ill health. This moment of Romantic hypochondria layers Sara’s poetry addressed to her children: her poem ‘Poppies’ boldly eulogises the plant’s analgesic properties in the form of opium, making for a ‘darkly confessional’ (97) poetics redolent of Sylvia Plath. In reading Shelley’s novels, Turner couples Freud’s ‘theory of repetition as the manifestation of repressed trauma’ (158) with Judith Butler’s conception of ‘performativity’ (158) to voice the ‘static and all-consuming mutual focus’ (173) between fathers and daughters.

Turner's analysis of the 'writing-back gesture' (8) also yields affordances in the field of life writing, in view of the children's intriguing failure – or unvoiced refusal – to produce expected biographies of their fathers, in the emergent 'two-volume 'life and letters' format' (149) of the time, which Turner ascribes to their scepticism towards the purposes of Romantic-era biography as 'celebratory memorials' (37). Turner highlights a sonnet by Hartley on his father he enclosed in a letter, and compares this to the version published in *Poems* (1851), pointing to Hartley's dimming of Coleridge's 'celestial fire' in the first version into one merely 'imputed' (74-75). Attributing the incomplete status of Shelley's biographical memoir of Godwin partly to her unwillingness to raise controversy, Turner highlights Shelley's short essay 'Life of Godwin,' appended to the 1831 edition of *Caleb Williams*, which characterises the still-living Godwin oddly as a 'monument of the last generation' (135), indicating his 'obsolescence' (3) to her own later generation.

The vignettes of the four Romantic children make for a compelling study: William Godwin Jr., particularly, comes across as a writer who deserves appreciation, 'at the very least,' for his 'powerful, pacy Gothic narrative (214). At times, however, the book seems to segue to Judith Plotz's *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (2001), which proceeded along the notion of a 'totemic' (25) Romantic child created by canonical male writers – a notion that has been teased apart in counter-narratives elsewhere.

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