

Paul Cheshire, *William Gilbert and Esoteric Romanticism: A Contextual Study and Annotated Edition of The Hurricane*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. Pp. 254. £85. ISBN 9781786941206.

William Gilbert was part of the literary scene in Bristol in the mid-1790s, where he published *The Hurricane: a Theosophical and Western Eclogue*, and impressed the more famous Romantics living there. Paul Cheshire seeks ‘to provide a guide and introduction to that strange unfiltered work: to show how it made a contribution to Romantic culture and that, behind Gilbert’s fragmentary exposition, there lies a coherent metaphysical scheme’ (2).

The first section covers Gilbert’s early life and literary connections, in London, writing on prophecy and astrology for *The Conjuror’s Magazine*, and then in Bristol, where he interacted with the first-generation Romantics. Coleridge positioned himself between Gilbert’s esotericism and John Thelwall’s empiricism, believing each to be a valid, but partial, kind of knowledge. Wordsworth acknowledged borrowings from Gilbert’s poem. When the Solitary in *The Excursion* imagines an American man, uncorrupted by civilization, though, Cheshire argues that Wordsworth transforms the original passage from *The Hurricane* ‘into a portrayal of delusion’ (97). Wordsworth did not trust Gilbert’s apprehension of the spirit in nature. The Southey chapter is less successful because Cheshire notes parallels between Southey’s *Joan of Arc* and *The Hurricane*, but does not argue for any direct influence either way. Consequently, when Cheshire later claims that Joan’s natural theology ‘can be seen as an expression of esoteric romanticism’, the relevance of Gilbert seems minimal.

At the centre of the book is the new edition of *The Hurricane*. It is a fascinating poem and merits greater attention from scholars. It bears comparison with the work of William Blake, and the early, apocalyptic poems of Coleridge. Cheshire’s annotations offer insightful commentary. Most of the poem consists of Gilbert’s own extensive, and often abstruse, notes. Cheshire carefully explains Gilbert’s explanation.

The final third of the book further elucidates *The Hurricane*’s obscurities. The poem’s scheme is ‘based on the belief that the arrangement of the physical world is analogous to, and reveals the nature of, higher metaphysical principles that are the true causes of events on the physical plane’ (166). In the ‘Hermetic Geography’ of *The Hurricane*, the continents correspond with the four elements and different modes of knowledge. When Europe colonizes the Americas, there is an infusion of American spirits into European bodies: divine wisdom triumphs over the shallow materialism of European enlightenment ideas. This inspires the French Revolution (symbolized by the hurricane), and ultimately, Europe’s spiritual renewal.

Cheshire also clarifies *The Hurricane*’s references to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the secretive rites centred around the worship of the goddesses Ceres and Proserpina, as part of a Neoplatonic allegory for the journey of the soul through purification to return to the divine realm. Cheshire suggests that the peaceful island at the end of the poem is the realm of purified souls, but also wishes to avoid ‘a precise interpretation’. Instead ‘the point lies in being receptive to where *The Hurricane* takes you, and the ideas you bring to bear, as you are drawn into the mysteries of this strange poem’ (201).

Cheshire considers Gilbert as a Romantic poet. Although Gilbert’s extant poetic corpus is small (just three poems), Cheshire raises the possibility that his verse developed due to the influence of the Bristol circle, and that they led him to see nature as the agent of spiritual renewal. The antepenultimate note to *The Hurricane* provides Gilbert’s own vision of nature’s ‘one life’, ‘while seeing beyond the pantheistic *appearance* of this experience’ (182). Furthermore, Gilbert’s poem ‘A Solitary Effusion in a Summer’s Evening’ (first published with *The Hurricane* and reproduced here), depicts ‘Nature’, Cheshire argues, as ‘a

living presence' (221). Although the focus of this study is *The Hurricane* itself, more detailed attention could have been given to this shorter poem, which is Gilbert's version of the greater Romantic lyric.

The book concludes by considering the relationship between esotericism and Romanticism. Cheshire notes that two key features of esotericism, as identified by Antoine Faivre, overlap with Romanticism: '*Living nature*' and '*Imagination and mediation*'. The unanswered question is whether the Romantics treated nature as an intermediary, whether they understood participation in the divine 'as coming *from* or *through* nature' (222).

William Gilbert and Esoteric Romanticism provides an excellent basis for further scholarly work, both on Gilbert, and on the esoteric in Romantic culture more generally. An oddity of the study is its arrangement. The later chapters, containing the exegesis of the poem, would actually work better being placed before the text of the poem, as an extended introduction to it. Conversely, the early chapters on Gilbert's literary relationship with the Romantics would have greater impact if placed after the poem, where they would feed more directly into the conclusions about 'Esoteric Romanticism'. However, this minor inconvenience of having to read the book slightly out of order should not detract from the illuminating scholarship throughout.

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