

**Will Bowers, *The Italian Idea: Anglo-Italian Radical Literary Culture, 1815-1823*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xviii + 269. £75.00. ISBN 9781108491969.**

Will Bowers's study focuses on the period between 1815 and 1823, which saw 'significant Anglo-Italian [cultural] interaction' (177), thus being the second of three waves of cultural exchange between the two countries. If 1815 is the year in which European peace began, which facilitated travelling to the continent, 1823 marks the Italian writer and intellectual Ugo Foscolo's retreat from London's literary scene as well as Lord Byron's journey to Greece, one year after his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley's death. This time-span of merely eight years seems short, yet through activities of mediator figures, literary and formal influences, translations, editions, reviewing, literary production by authors such as Byron, Shelley and Leigh Hunt, as well as travels to Italy, the period emerges as incredibly wealthy and fertile in terms of cultural and literary exchange. Bowers situates the 'radical' element of his title not so much in the field of political ideas than of innovations in poetic form, which stood in marked opposition to the correctness of the French school favoured by eighteenth-century British writers. This meticulous survey carefully contextualizes second-generation British Romantic writers' texts, among them Byron's *Parisina*, *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, Shelley's 'Euganean Hills', *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *The Triumph of Life*, proving that a study of Anglo-Italian cross-currents provides additional insights.

The first chapter, which looks at the years leading up to 1815, stipulates that for the British, two Italies existed: the historical Italy of ancient Rome and the Renaissance as opposed to a modern Italy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the former was praised and investigated by historians and sought out by travellers on the Grand Tour, the contemporary Italy they in fact encountered did not always elicit a similar amount of unfettered enthusiasm. Italians were stereotyped as extrovert, theatrical and libidinous, and a danger to English restraint. Although Londoners flocked to the opera, Italian cultural products (including even Dante's works) were viewed with suspicion. Much of Italy's contemporary poetic production was not even known by the British, a fact that intellectuals like Lorenzo Da Ponte attempted to remedy, who, while in London, not only wrote librettos but also sold Italian books and published Italian poetry e.g., by Giovanni Battista Casti, which in turn contributed to making Byron aware of the potential of the *ottava rima*.

Chapter two maps out the genesis of an Italian style, taking Byron's *Parisina* and Hunt's *The Story of Rimini*, both set in medieval Italy, as case studies. The poets combined Italian sources with the genre of the romance, associated with a conservative nationalism to which neither of the two subscribed. Critics showed hostile reactions: it was the newness in form they reacted to, for example Hunt's free remodelling of the heroic couplet, which markedly departed from Alexander Pope's use and later resurfaced in Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo*. Chapter three returns to contexts by focusing on mediator figures and the literary-political salon at Holland House, where Foscolo, Giuseppe Binda and Serafino Buonaiuti held various positions over the years, while Lord Holland – unauthorized by his own government – made diplomatic interventions in Italy. Foscolo no longer published literature but turned to literary criticism and translation. Although a major figure, he was not the only Italian mediator in those years.

Chapter four highlights the centrality of Venice to Romantic writing, considering two texts, which are very different in tone and outlook, Shelley's 'Euganean Hills' and Byron's *Beppo*. Bowers shows that *Beppo* was influenced not only by the Venetian Carnival Byron experienced while living in Venice, but also by Casti's contemporary Italian satire and by Venetian café society. Chapter five looks at Caroline of Brunswick's return from Italy in 1820 and her subsequent trial in the House of Lords. Having stayed in Italy for a prolonged period of time, Caroline, who, in the context of the revolution in Naples, eventually became equated with European liberty, found that Italian witnesses were invoked to testify against her, a

circumstance leading to satirical reactions, among them Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The Pisan coterie (Byron, Shelley and Hunt) are treated in chapter six and in the coda.

One of this study's great strengths is the wealth of diverse material Bowers welds together, combining reflections on authors' influence; rhyme schemes; sub-genres such as romance, the satirical mode, history, translation; mediator figures; and even advertising (in *Beppo*) to add new angles of analysis. One weakness, though, is the choice of the term 'radical' to indicate mostly poetic innovation. Since many actors of Bowers's Anglo-Italian theatre flirted with radical political positions, as did other contemporaries, the title raises expectations for more political analysis.

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