Michael E. Robinson, *The Queer Bookishness of Romanticism*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. 232. £81. ISBN 9781793607935.

Shayne Husbands, *The Early Roxburghe Club 1812-1835: Book Club Pioneers and the Advancement of English Literature*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2017. Pp. 216. £70. ISBN 9781783086900.

In their respective studies, Michael Robinson and Shayne Husbands contribute substantially to what Ina Harris has nicely termed the 'bookish turn in Romantic studies'. The transgressive topic known variously as 'bibliomania', 'bibliophilia', 'bibliosophia', is, contra Robinson, not a neglected interest in Romantic studies. Counting from Philip Connell's 2000 essay, 'Bibliomania, Book Collecting', the topic is in its third decade and has given rise to distinguished papers and monographs. Robinson's and Husbands's contributions bring to the topic fresh perspectives and stimulating analyses.

The second decade of the nineteenth century saw the publication of books, pamphlets, and review articles in which bibliophiles were criticised as having an inordinate interest in books as objects. Critics labelled collectors 'enthusiasts', enthusiasm being a code word for madness. For critics of bookishness, such unhinged behaviour was an unwanted distraction from the weightier debates that were taking place in a civilisation-defining moment in the nation's literary history. The great increase in the number of publications of all types and of reading by persons of all ages, sexes, and classes was profoundly impacting the political, social, and economic landscape. Among key points of contention in the broader debate about the place of literature in society was the nature of authorship and the control of meaning. Nationalists and Romantics valorised authors and their books as a national heritage. In contrast, critical review journals damned the Romantics as egoists and modelled collective, anonymous authorship and the production of texts as marketable products. The debate over bookishness was small fry in a sea of literary contention. That does not make it an unimportant topic or less telling. Robinson and Husbands convincingly argue that bookishness played a role in these debates.

Husbands and Robinson ask why a marginal issue, bookishness, elicited intense abuse. Husbands focuses the debate regarding book love on class issues, and the contribution to literature of authorship, editing, publication, and distribution of facsimile reproductions. In Robinson's book the focus is on the disordering of boundaries between reading and the 'author function' (passim), the dissident uses of books by readers, critics, pedants, collectors, and auctioneers, and, particularly, book love as a form of eroticism that embraced rather than transcended materiality. As Robinson puts it, the 'discourse of shared book love is actually about something much more scandalous and fatal than books' (97).

At the core of contemporary discontent with bookish men and women was their provoking materialism, their perverse advertising of uses for books other than the reading of them. The acceptable view of a book's legitimate purpose was the preservation and dissemination of shared knowledge. Robinson locates the source of abuse of book lovers in heteronormative discomfort with bibliophilic desire and bibliographic pleasure. He finds a resemblance, even an equivalence, between fulfilling a lust for books through gratuitous purchase and onanistic satisfaction of sexual desire. Bibliomaniacs were using books for affective self-gratification and, guilty themselves of the seven deadly sins, were condemned for encouraging sin in others.

Husbands locates a class element as well in the social condemnation of bookish behaviour. Critics were anxious that promiscuous book collecting, and the printing of long-forgotten vernacular texts, cocked a snook at the cultural hegemony of the middle class. The extravagant sums bibliomaniacs paid for rare and neglected books (for all the public knew,

justifiably neglected books) inspired thoughts of aristocratic wastefulness, promiscuity, luxuriance, acquisitiveness, exclusivity, and preening self-regard.

Husbands and Robinson focus on individuals whose bibliophilic behaviour attracted unfriendly attention. There are several familiar, top-deck passengers in Husbands' and Robinson's Ships of Fools – Sir Walter Scott, Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Charles Lamb. Much refreshing attention is given, though, to literary steerage, to the bibliographer Thomas Frognall Dibdin; to the queer Ladies of Llangollen; to the book forgers Henry Forman and Thomas J. Wise; to the man who started the fuss, the duke of Roxburghe; and to the ill-fated bibliophile Alexander Boswell. That approach is neither peculiar nor perverse; it is essential to the bookish project. The experience of individuals is the flesh and bone of book history.

Robinson investigates the 'strangely vehement' (14) response of society to this 'peculiar' (105) community of consumers for whom books were an object correlative of their owners' inner state. He makes his case in a series of biographies, surveys of the 'lived experience' (88) of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby; of Dibdin; of Lamb and his fictional alter-ego, Elia; and of Forman and Wise. Robinson's theory-driven analysis is sometimes syntactically challenging but deeply analytical and intellectually stimulating throughout. In his subjects' private and public personae Robinson discovers an aesthetic defined by a perverse pleasure in books' typography, margins, paper, and binding, or their rarity, antiquity, or inflated valuation. Shared pleasure, disapproval, and marginalisation created among these bibliophiles an 'ornamental community' (86) of the happily oppressed.

Robinson discovers a resemblance between the marginalisation of bookish men and women and the ostracisation of sexual dissidents. Bibliophilic affection for a material object triggered a phobic social response equivalent to that meted out to 'dissident sexual expression' (13). It was an intolerant response that drove such men and women to the margins of society and the literary world.

Elements of Robinson's initial chapter, on the Ladies of Llangollen and Plas Newyyd, their Welsh retreat, appear to undercut his broader arguments. The retreat, we are told, was a site of camp, queer masculinity, off-putting to the locals, one would think, but apparently the locals welcomed them, and a cavalcade of magi visited them. His most curious and entertaining chapter is on the *flâneur* Charles Lamb. Robinson sketches Lamb as a dissident stylist. Lamb is a 'punk' antiquarian, an ambivalent ironist, a collector of the 'detritus of the retail market for books' (143). Lamb perversely drew attention to his collection of dog-eared and broken-spined throwaways for which he paid a few pence. Robinson's uncovering of Lamb's bohemianism and his likening it to consumerist pleasure seeking and Protestant expressive individualism are among the most interesting passages in his book.

Robinson is difficult to summarise. He presents arguments not in the manner of stepping stones but as brilliant flashes. Because flashes of brilliance fade, even after several readings one struggles to recall the argumentative relevance of 'dissident homemaking' (80), 'discursive erethism' (123), and the like. One suspects that Robinson gives in to a temptation he warns against, that of 'over-read[ing]' (142), of finding queer themes where none might exist. Robinson's few sins are endemic to the academy. They do not detract from a considerable achievement.

Husbands tilts at her own obsession of sorts, at the underappreciation and unwarranted vilification of an early and famous community of bookmen, the Roxburghe Club. She sees the club members as instead pioneers who made a significant contribution to British literature by preserving, reprinting, and educating the public on the value of ancient vernacular texts. In several crisp, deeply researched, and lively chapters, she rejects the traditional denigration of Roxburghe members as a group of frivolous, gourmandising dilettantes who published unauthoritative editions of rare books. Critics found objectionable the Club members' class-

challenging neglect of genius authors, gentlemen, in-favour of printers and typesetters, and tradesmen. Husbands interestingly attributes continuing denigration of the group by bibliographical scholars to emotion, to an 'almost self-conscious dissociation between academic study of the book and its antiquarian past' (3).

Bibliomania, she explains, was as much a 'media construct' (13) as it was a condition traceable to psychological or social forces. In any case, most members of the Club do not qualify as bibliomaniacs. Richard Heber and a few others excepted, members' collecting was not indiscriminate. Their libraries were intelligently curated collections of early texts and books valuable as literature, not merely collectible.

Animus was directed at the Club for its supposedly extravagant dinners. Their dinners, Husbands points out, were no more extravagant than other clubs and societies. Like the Royal Society, the Roxburghe Club was justly criticised as being more a social society than a serious intellectual body. She finds it unsurprising, though, that the tenor of the Club in its first years was more social than academic, more clubbish than institutional. The Club consisted at first of a group of friends and Club membership was based on shared knowledge and a shared passion.

Other criticism of the Club was similarly misplaced or was the product of envy or personal animosity. The Club was criticised for publishing books of interest only to members, but it was at the same time criticised for not making copies available for public purchase. Some of the attention the Club attracted Husbands attributes to 'celebrity culture' (23), the enduring public fascination with elites born equally of envy and admiration. Husbands deftly sweeps aside the accusation that Club members failed to contribute to the diffusion of useful knowledge, to promote the interests of living authors, or direct their wealth into the local economy. Husbands dispenses with the Roxburghe Club's reputation as a retreat for moneyed aristocrats. She demonstrates the political, social, religious, and class eclecticism of the early group.

Robinson's and Husbands's books overlap since both investigate bookishness, Thomas Frognall Dibdin, and the Roxburghe Club, and since both seek to understand the source and importance of bibliophiles' status as pariahs of the literary world. Otherwise, there is little resemblance between the two writers' substantive information and analytical approach. As a single but typical example, Robinson and Husbands discuss Dibdin's colourful and prolix prose. Robinson finds in it 'camp sensibility' (143) and the anticipation of 'narratives of homosexual self-realization' (146). Husbands more simply but also interestingly explains Dibdin's 'overblown romantic style' (49) as a personal tic that, while embarrassing even to some of his supporters, evidently attracted an admiring audience.

These two fine books are valuable contributions to knowledge in the field and they deserve to be widely read, but one fears their narrowness of subject matter will confine their readership to specialist scholars and their purchase to academic libraries.

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