

Samantha Matthews, *Album Verses and Romantic Literary Culture: Poetry, Manuscript, Print, 1780-1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 291. £60. ISBN 9780198857945.

Samantha Matthews's fascinating study has its origin in 'the albo-mania' that afflicted middle-class young women in the 1820s and 1830s, the short-lived fashion that induced them to besiege authors and public figures with requests that they offer a contribution to their albums: an inscription, it may be, or simply an autograph, or, best of all, a sketch or a signed poem. But Matthews is not primarily interested in examining the albums that they compiled. Her interest is rather in examining the place of album keeping in 'the wider culture' of the Romantic period (4). The album phenomenon lays bare the complex, often paradoxical relationship in the period between male writers and women readers, and between autograph and typeface or manuscript and print.

Contributions to an album were equally valued for the hand in which they were written as for their content. The name of the Duke of Wellington was ubiquitous, but Dora Wordsworth's album included the Duke's signature. It was in the years from 1780 to 1850 that publishing became an industry supplying a mass readership, and albums, it might seem, reacted against this development. *The Corsair* and *Rob Roy* were infinitely reproducible, whereas each album was unique. In fact, the relationship between albums and the publishing industry was more complex, one lively demonstration of which is that Matthews's first two chapters deal with the 'Album of the Fathers', offered to all those who visited the Grande Chartreuse, and the album kept by the Jerningham family to which visitors to Costessey Hall, the family's Norfolk seat, were invited to contribute. Both albums have disappeared, and can be reconstructed only because some of the contributions have been 'remediated', to borrow Matthews's preferred term, in print.

In her third chapter, Matthews focuses on Sarah Sophia Child-Villiers, the rich and beautiful Lady Jersey, friend of Byron and one of the leading Whig hostesses, who began keeping an album in 1805 when she was 20. The habit stayed with her for the rest of her life. Lady Jersey was powerful enough to exert control over the content of her albums – she marked certain entries, including one of Byron's, 'not to be copied' – with the result that through the sequence of her albums she charts her understanding of herself and her world. It was commonplace for contributors to compare the book in which they wrote to its female owner, but in Lady Jersey's case the comparison had added point. The contributor who noted the album's 'gold and azure dress' thought of it as a 'Drawing-room' in which the 'wise and lively, grave and gay' were assembled, pointing out that in just a few years the room would become a 'silent Catacomb', and understood that her albums were scarcely to be distinguished from the woman who kept them (123). Like the scrapbooks of the Scottish poet, Edwin Morgan, they might be understood as a covert autobiography.

In the 1820s enthusiasm for albums spread to the middle classes. As soon as it did so, 'albo-mania' produced its antidote: the hostility to albums, the young women who kept them, and the kinds of poems they included that Charles Lamb called 'albo-phobia'. Male poets and critics united to disparage a fashion that threatened to feminise and to deprofessionalise the craft of poetry. Poets took to complaining of the unending requests for contributions. 'I die of Albo-phobia!' Lamb remarked, explaining his decision to move to Enfield as prompted solely by his need to 'escape the Albumean persecution' (163). The strident hostility common amongst poets to albums and to the young women who kept them is an exemplary instance of the fraught relationship between poets and their readers so characteristic of the period. But the relationship was paradoxical. Lamb both satirised albums and contributed to them more generously than any other Romantic poet. He even published a volume of verse entitled, with predictable consequences for its reception, *Album Verses, with a Few Others*. He responded

to that hostile reception by writing a review of his own volume in which he defended album verses as poems that could only appear in an album dedicated to a specific person and for whom they were composed, which compounds the mystery of why he had chosen to collect his own album verses in a printed volume offered to the general reader.

Most albums were kept by women, and most contributions to them were made by men, an asymmetry that Matthews explores most feelingly in her final chapter in which she studies the albums kept by Edith Southey, Sara Coleridge, and Dora Wordsworth, all of whom (even Sara Coleridge) found it as impossible to win independence from their formidable fathers in their albums as they did in the rest of their lives. Matthews's rich and richly illustrated study illuminates the album culture of the Romantic period but, as she rightly claims, it sheds much light too on the wider literary culture of the period.

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