

Rieko Suzuki, *The Shelleys and the Brownings: Textual Re-Imaginations and the Question of Influence*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022. Pp. ix + 204. £104. ISBN 9781800856479.

Rieko Suzuki's book echoes the recent tendency to emphasise literary 'communities' (4) rather than isolated individual creativity. She presses home a sense of continuity rather than absolute break between the Romantic and Victorian periods, and continues the path paved by critics like Richard Cronin and Mark Sandy. Suzuki's assessment focuses on the Shelley-Browning 'constellation' (17, 20, 182), a word that Robert Browning used in his famous conceptualization of the writer-reader relationship to 'connect the scattered lights into one constellation' (*Paracelsus*). This is a notion constantly evoked in this book, and one that achieves an admirable balance between Romantic historicism and the myriad operations of the text. What was originally intended to be an exploration of Shelley's individual works (as disclosed in the coda) becomes a nuanced and meticulous comparative study of the influence between two literary couples, and the thrust of this book seems to favour the Brownings in a surprising way, with the societal significance of the dramatic monologue looming large. Suzuki's own research process exemplifies how the text could be presented in a full Browningsque manner, waiting to be unfolded by those competent and avid readers in unexpected ways.

Chapters one and two focus on Mary Shelley's influence on two of Robert Browning's early poems, *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, starting from Mary Shelley's 'nuanced treatment of Prometheanism' (50), as well as her staunchly Romantic ideas of societal change based on love and imagination. Chapter 3 discusses the aesthetic significance of the Shelleys in the formation of Robert Browning's taste, as revealed in one artistic poem by Browning, 'Old Pictures in Florence', and in his 'Essay on Shelley'.

Chapters four and five demonstrate the 'revisionary scheme' (93) that Browning employs in *The Ring and the Book* and *Fifine at the Fair* to re-write Shelley's *The Cenci* and 'The Triumph of Life'. Chapter 6 shows how Shelley's radical politics and liberal ideas fit into Elizabeth Barrett's works, despite the latter's attempts to keep the former's radicalism 'at bay' (133). Suzuki sheds light on some important thematic threads throughout these chapters: the Romantic quests and Victorian reflections on Prometheanism in the discussion of 'two kinds of Prometheanism in question' (30) in Chapter 1 and Elizabeth Barrett's comparison of Aeschylus's Prometheus with the figure of Christ in her translation in Chapter six. The writer-reader relationship gradually evolves from the failed Shelleyan model in Chapter two to the more middle-class and democratic device of the dramatic monologue endorsed by Browning in Chapters four and five. Suzuki's focus on the role of the poet, particularly in Chapters three and six, highlights the light metaphor to illustrate the difference between the 'white light' conveyed by 'subjective' poets such as Shelley and Elizabeth Barrett and the light 'broken into prismatic hues' by 'objective' poets such as Browning (154).

Suzuki's research methodology in this book shows flexibility, and her ability to traverse biographical boundaries and the 'gendered demarcations of poetic subjects' (161) are two noteworthy cases to mention. In Chapter four, a biographical reading of '[r]escuing the poetess' (110) in Browning's way of revolutionizing the world might fall into cliché; however, Suzuki insists that '[t]o read the rescue theme beyond the biographical and treat it as a trope enables us to appreciate its ramifications in *The Ring*' (110), and she endows three enriching layers of meaning to the rescue theme: i) as a figuration of Browning's own rescue of Barrett; ii) as Beatrice Cenci re-envisioned as Pompilia; iii) as Italy itself. Suzuki's gendered reflections on the role of poet show critical subtlety: she quotes directly from Mary Shelley's eloquent speech on aesthetics and judgement to justify Robert Browning's 'gross misreading of Mary Shelley' (76). She finds creativity in the 'gendered fissure' (180) and what Isobel Armstrong calls the 'form of mediation' (179) in Elizabeth Barrett's address to her own son, 'Pen', at the end of her

radical political poem *Casa Guidi Windows*. Suzuki also balances the opposing views of Marjorie Stone and Stephanie L. Johnson where she discerns the female voice could be a powerful 'masking device' (161) in 'A Vision of Poets' that helps Elizabeth Barrett to rewrite and join the patrilineal poetic tradition by creating a 'rift between herself and the male poetic tradition' (161).

Why the focus on 'effect'? Suzuki's lingering preoccupation with this theory of 'effect' shares common ground with dramatic monologue, viz. the effect 'to produce upon the reader' (2). The final message of this book is to inspire liberal thinking 'among the people' (180). This is at the core, of Suzuki's wider concerns, for everything discussed in this book, from lyricism to drama to the development of the dramatic monologue, to political and historical consciousness, reveals a greater meaning: that behind the literary 'communities' and societal influence of the Shelley-Browning 'constellation' is a realistic vision of a better, more resilient society.

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