

**Alex Watson, *Romantic Marginality: Nation and Empire on the Borders of the Page*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012. Pp. 192. £60. ISBN 9781848931923.**

Alex Watson's *Romantic Marginality* is a study which explores the role of paratexts, with a special emphasis upon annotation, in Romantic literature. It is a task which remains in keeping with book historians' conviction about the significance of considering the materiality of texts in the explanation of the process of the creation of meaning. Alex Watson analyses various kinds and uses of notes in Romantic texts to demonstrate that, contrary to the common belief that paratexts play a subservient role to the main text – or centered text, as he prefers to refer to it – they are a crucial site of cultural and political negotiations. Their capacity to disrupt monoglossia renders them an ideal tool for the exposition of the struggle of ideological forces within the texts in which they are employed, and that is why they are particularly utile in texts describing cultures incorporated into the British Empire. The existing studies, as Watson argues, have failed to do justice to the complexity of the uses to which notes were put. Gerard Genette in his *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987), one of the most significant studies on paratextual apparatus, argues, for instance, that it serves a secondary role by definition and is usually used to corroborate the author's arguments contained in the main text. Watson resolves to prove that this is a simplified view on paratexts and in his own book aims to 'enrich and refine' (3) the theory of paratexts in the context of the emerging colonial and imperial discourse.

To elaborate his own theoretical model of paratexts, the author of *Romantic Marginality* analyses diverse texts, representing their use in various kinds of discourse and genres: poetry, national tales, travelogues, historical books, Augustan satires and historical novels among them. Chapter 1 traces changing attitudes towards annotation, pointing to the fact that the modern conviction about the secondary role of paratexts is an inheritance from eighteenth-century scholars and that it is quite astonishing given the fact that before and after the Enlightenment their possibilities for supplementing the main text were frequently exploited. Chapter 2 demonstrates the marginal text as a space frequently used to reveal frictions occurring in the composition of the text. The remaining four chapters are devoted to the principal subject of the study; that is, to the exploration of the role of notes in the construction and deconstruction of the discourses of nationalism and imperialism (3).

One of the greatest merits of Alex Watson's study is that it shows how flexible an instrument paratexts are in the textual negotiations of ideological positions. By the analysis of his multiple examples of pre-Romantic and Romantic texts which employ annotation, the author successfully demonstrates that notes can be used both to verify and subvert the meanings included in the main, or centered, text. They may be used to refer the readers to scholarly, antiquarian, topographical or ethnographic data about the depicted cultures, to present the author's direct experience or merely to give his or her emotional comments. The examples show that the variety of information placed in the notes can serve multiple functions: it can appeal to the readers' reason or emotions, present the viewpoint of the dominant or marginalized culture, and search for dissonances or common points between the culture of the author and the one he or she describes. The scrutiny of the diverse functions which the content of the notes plays in relation to the centered text illustrates the paratexts' suitability for the representation of the inescapable tensions within cultures absorbed within the British Empire. Watson thus demonstrates the notes' inherently dialogic nature and the contradictory forces within colonial and national discourses.

The analyses of numerous texts in *Romantic Marginalities* have the obvious benefit of illustrating the diverse uses to which Romantic, and pre-Romantic, authors put their

annotative apparatus. In this sense Watson succeeds in enriching Genette's model of paratextuality. The author, however, stops short of attempting to synthesize the conclusions of the individual texts and of constructing a new, more nuanced, theory of paratexts. The conclusion to the study, where such a model could have been described, offers instead a 'survey of the afterlife of Romantic marginality up to the present' (140). It also comes as a surprise that the analysis of texts which deal with the relationship of dominant and dominated cultures is not rooted more strongly in the theories of postcolonialism and cultural hegemony. The application of such theories could reveal the nature of the correlation between print culture and the creation of national and imperialist discourse.

Alex Watson's *Romantic Marginality* without doubt improves our understanding of the role of annotation in the literature of the Romantic period. The analysis of the interplay of the margins and the centre in numerous and variegated texts is a good way to observe the evolution of colonial and imperialist discourses and their attempts to construct a culture which would accommodate the conflicting worldviews of the cultures absorbed by Britain. The overview of the wide range of Romantic paratexts lays foundations for further studies devoted to the subject of the relations between print and national and colonial discourse.

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