

Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. 381. £15.50. ISBN 9780801894749.

In *Romantic Interactions*, Susan J. Wolfson responds to what she terms a ‘famed myth’ (1) of Romanticism: that which associates it with the solitary, the singular, and the subjective. In doing so, she adds to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to identify the various ‘communities’ at play in Romantic literature. Wolfson’s work in this field, however, is unique in the way in which it defines the dynamics of interaction taking place between Romantic-period texts and authors. This study is not interested in intertextuality, collaboration, or collectives, but rather focuses on examining a range of authors who, while speaking at times as if from a position of solitude, simultaneously display an awareness of audience. Wolfson demonstrates that this audience frequently comprises other authorial voices: the writer, then, comes to a position of self-definition as ‘author’ through his or her connection with other authors.

The first three chapters of this study look at Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft as female writers of the 1790s, examining how these authors responded to male literary traditions. For Smith, the Terror and subsequent conflict with France led to a scathing female perspective on war, with *The Emigrants* illustrating how women have historically been the victims of men’s conflicts. In her fast-paced examination of this text, Wolfson traces how Smith responds to Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and others, not in terms of mere echo and allusion, but through genuine and complex engagement with masculine traditions. Here, we find ‘she-shades’ of Gray (35), and observe how Smith ‘recruits’ Collins (48); other interactions are layered, with Milton’s words set against those of both Young and Cowper. This ‘audit’ of the male voices of the past is both proactive and critical, and refuses to adopt a singular or unified perspective: Smith sometimes figures herself as allied to men’s traditions, but at other times sets herself up in opposition. Turning to Wollstonecraft, Wolfson examines how *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* addresses poetry of the female character. We are introduced to Wollstonecraft’s diverse interactions with writers such as Milton and Shakespeare, with Wolfson demonstrating that Wollstonecraft’s female reader is likewise invited to try out different voices and consequently to interact with other readers.

The second section of *Romantic Interactions*, comprising a further three chapters, examines the work of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, deconstructing the dynamics of their complicated and manifold interactions. Wordsworth, the beloved public Poet, is set against Dorothy, who resisted the label of Author. Wordsworth’s poetic revisions of Dorothy’s records must surely be complicated, Wolfson suggests, by a Bloomian anxiety of influence: a tension made all the more threatening by the fact that he is not engaging with a strong male predecessor, but a cherished sister. The relationship between the pair is shown to be simultaneously productive and defensive, with William struggling with his sister’s words while Dorothy experiments with her own authority in a manner that tests some of her brother’s established values and ideas. In many ways this is the strongest section of the study, with Wolfson unpicking tiny details in order to open out our understanding of William’s and Dorothy’s work. Original and ambitious, these chapters refigure our traditional understanding of the sibling dynamic between the Wordsworths and break down the conventional masculine/feminine binary that separates their work.

The final two chapters of this book consider Byron, whom Wolfson examines in terms of his celebrity status. She suggests that the poet not only teased his public with plural Byrons (including Melancholy Byron, Aloof Byron, and Dandy Byron), but was subsequently reproduced by female writers in the Byronic heroine of the 1820s and 1830s. Engaging

closely with various portraits and written accounts by Byron's male contemporaries, Wolfson traces how these 'Byron-smitten' (12) men provided a stimulus for women writing both to and about Byron, from the so-called Female Byron, L.E.L., to Felicia Hemans's 'public displays of affection' (268) in her echoes and epigraphs.

One of the real strengths of this book is Wolfson's talent for close reading, which often demonstrates remarkable sensitivity and is frequently highly illuminating. In the tolling of the masculine rhyme *roar/War* in Smith's poetry, for example, Wolfson identifies an engagement with both Pope's Jove bidding 'the brazen throat of war to roar' and Milton's description of a world in which the 'brazen Throat of Warr had ceast to roar'. By incorporating these words into her own work, Wolfson argues, Smith does not attempt to borrow the authority of her male predecessors, but rather uses the echo created to represent the horrific repetition of war. Always original, Wolfson balances lesser-known texts against more canonical works, but even her reading of Dorothy's famous 'daffodils' journal entry against William's 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud' succeeds in reinvigorating well-trodden ground, suggesting that William 'replays' the shared moment as a 'resource for a solitary self' (175). Often striking, always convincing, and at times ground-breaking, *Romantic Interactions* is a significant contribution to contemporary Romantic studies.

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