Noah Comet, *Romantic Hellenism and Women Writers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 167. £50. ISBN 9781137304971.

In *Romantic Hellenism*, Noah Comet takes a refreshing new look at Greek influences in the Romantic period, focusing on women writers and readers in the contexts of magazines, annuals, and areas like fashion. These constitute ephemeral but pervasive reinventions of Greek ideals by women who, while admiring Hellenism, balanced this by noting the social inequities and misogyny of Greek society. Comet offers a persuasive critique of traditional attitudes to English recoveries of Greece, demonstrating that the systematic revival of knowledge about Greece did not wait for those marvellous Victorian recoveries, but was deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition.

The women writers discussed – Lucy Aikin, Felicia Hemans, and Letitia Landon – have a separate chapter, but other women are referred to throughout. The 'Introduction' sets a wonderful tone of wittiness, yet seriousness, in its lucid critique of accounts of Greek cultural reception into the early nineteenth century. These accounts argue that 'the reception of Greek antiquity, which had, among men, blossomed into a many-faceted and well-noted neoclassicism, languished, among women, as a mere fad' (2). On the contrary, women 'were profoundly involved in shaping and sharing the Greek influence […] [so that] the Greek mania, which had enraptured poets […] [and] inspired a generation of artists and architects […] was for England's women too a consuming idea' (2). This heart of the study is compellingly and beautifully woven into a many-coloured tapestry, illustrating these 'other' Greece imaginings by women who did not know Greek, probably, but who also bridged the less well-understood period of the mid-1820s and 1830s. Those were the years after Romantic enthusiasms and before Victorian recoveries. Such knowledge of women's reception of Greece disrupts traditional notions of Hellenism-in-Romanticism as the preserve of men, usually highly educated and often members of universities, men who followed the scholarly Germanic lead of the late eighteenth century.

One characteristic of the authoritative account of Hellenism in England is to imagine Greece 'as a monumental inheritance, as an ancestral voice' (3), arousing lofty ideals and encased in marble monuments or grand historical narratives of Troy, or in the sublime plays of Aeschylus. Comet's book, chapter after fascinating chapter, challenges this characterization, and demonstrates time and again how the ephemeral modes of women's Hellenism were themselves valuable and iconoclastic critiques. These critiques imagined Greece as an evanescent ideal and rejected the univocal and monumentalist approach; they refused to ignore the deeply undemocratic structures of Greek society. Such structures constituted a corpus of social inequity that, once acknowledged, revealed an 'other' Greece, one so prevalent as to force the admirer of the classical realm to recognise Greek ideals of democracy, beauty, wisdom, and freedom as limited and in need of close scrutiny.

Comet insists, however, that his study is not comparative, but an effort to show how prior inattention to women's reception of Greece has made it difficult to imagine what a larger paradigm of Romantic Hellenism might look like. He views the Greece of women writers as part of a cultural phenomenon so broad and far reaching as to diminish the importance of gender. His study, then, is indeed a study of Romantic Hellenism, but one describing England's Greece by narrating the so-far' untold half' of that story. That new half illuminates a much wider sphere than merely shedding light on the masculine, dominant account. Comet's *Romantic Hellenism and Women Writers* is also an astute supplement to Jenny's Wallace's study of 1997, *Shelley's Greece: Rethinking Romantic Hellenism*. Wallace's book is similarly iconoclastic in disrupting

monumentalist or univocalist accounts of Greece, through an examination of Shelley's ambivalences, his heterogeneous responses, and his sophisticated appreciation of the need actively to recreate and re-imagine the past, since it cannot be passively inherited. Like Comet, Wallace advocates the need to accept the idea of the 'other' as necessary for our understanding of ourselves and our own culture (compare *Black Athena*, by Martin Bernal). And we must accept a heterogeneous Greece split between Byzantine (Eastern) and Hellenist (Western) history and heritage. Comet extends these vital insights to articulate an English reception of Greece varied and unsettled, less unified and self-identical than previous masculine and Christian appropriations of ancient (pagan) Greek culture allow.

While the three chapters on Aikin, Hemans, and Landon are examples of scholarship at its most impressive, innovative, and convincing, my favourite chapters are, after Comet's simply remarkable and articulate 'Introduction', the first chapter, 'Hellenism and Women's Print Culture', and the final pages, 'Conclusion: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Reception of Romantic Women's Hellenism'. No reader interested either in Romanticism or in the English reception of Greece, in any period, should miss the opportunity of studying closely this astute, concise, and engaging account by Noah Comet.

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