

Fiona Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Pp. 237. £52.50. HB: ISBN 9781405191555; PB (2014) £27.99: ISBN 9781118773000.

Fiona Stafford's book is a superb introduction to Romantic poetry. Wide-ranging, detailed, ingeniously organised but at the same time clarifying, the book persuasively combines astute close readings of key poems with larger social, cultural and political considerations in a way that manages to make the conventional opposition of text to context seem to melt into air as we read. And as it proceeds, in fact, the book turns out to be structured around a series of such oppositions – which are shown to be complex, unstable and intricately inter-involved: oppositions not only of the private to the public, but also of pleasure to pain, of the Romantic 'ideal of sociability' to the traditional concept of Romantic solitude, of the poet to the reader, of orality to literacy (or speech to writing).

One of Stafford's major concerns is to analyse the ways in which the conventional understanding of the inward turn of Romantic poetry can itself be understood to have wider social, cultural and political implications. Indeed, her major claim is that canonical Romantic poems cannot effectively be read in isolation from the wider literary culture of the period on the one hand, and from scientific, economic, and political forces and developments of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries on the other hand. While such a position may now seem familiar, Stafford uses it as a foundation on which to embark on stimulating and insightful discussions of both well-known and more obscure writers and texts (in a way that seamlessly joins the still-canonical with the less well-known, Stafford pays detailed and expert attention to Robert Burns, Ann Yearsley, William Cowper, John Clare and others as well as to the canonical six, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats). The first chapter, for instance, includes a series of deft and elegant moves: Stafford links an aesthetics of pleasure, including 'delight in the immediate world' (5) and a concern with the interrelationship of mind and body that she argues characterizes Romantic poetry, with the gothic, a fashionable 'taste for melancholy' (17), the culture of sympathy, and the slave trade and abolition movement, on the way to addressing the abolitionist Samuel Taylor Coleridge's apparently inward-looking, self-contemplative 'Dejection' ode: 'To read or write about "Dejection"', Stafford notes, 'was not necessarily to retreat from society because "fellow feeling" was coming to be seen as foundational to morality' (23). And by arguing that poetry allowed for the development and articulation of the 'sympathetic imagination' as 'crucial to the nation', Stafford allows the reader to grasp, and even to make sense of, for example, the political cogency embedded within Percy Bysshe Shelley's otherwise seemingly extraordinary and indeed tendentious claim that poets are the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'.

If I have a reservation about Stafford's book it has to do with what is no doubt a response to the requirements or perceived requirements of the textbook mode: after attentive and compelling readings of poems and contexts, Stafford almost invariably rounds-off her chapters with rather flat and even slightly wooden accounts of what she has just done: while urbanization leads to an 'especially strong' sense of isolation, we are told, poetry offered 'congenial voices to combat feelings of alienation' (62); reading Romantic poetry, she remarks, is 'greatly enriched by some awareness of the cumulative discourse of the age' (79); the best Romantic poems 'can always be read and enjoyed independently, but they benefit, too, from being seen in good company' (92); and so on. Impelled, no doubt, by the exigencies of textbook publication, such comments allow truth to slide into truism, failing to do justice to the probing subtlety of the analyses that they follow and attempt to encapsulate.

And yet, written with an undergraduate audience in mind as it is, the book also offers in its detailed readings – of Romantic birds and the aesthetics of bird song, of conversation and the freedom of speech, of Romantic rainbows and Newtonian science, of ways of reading and ways of writing, of friendships and literary communities – as much as in its historical breadth and insight, an excellent ‘advanced’ introduction for graduate students and beyond. There are gems of insight on every page of this engaging and clarifying book, which opens up familiar and unfamiliar poems to considerations of verbal texture just as much as it reveals them in their cultural and political contexts. Stafford’s *Reading Romantic Poetry* teaches as much by example as by precept. This is how to read Romantic poetry and it is, as such, an ideal introduction to the period’s literary culture as a whole.

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