

Carmen Casaliggi Review of BYRONIC HEROES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S WRITING AND SCREEN ADAPTATION. By Sarah Wootton.

With the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* over two hundred years ago, Byron's first creation of his stern, melancholy, and brooding hero captured the reading public's attention and made him famous overnight. Other comparable protagonists were soon to follow. Ranging from Manfred and Lara, to Conrad, Cain, Don Juan, and the Giaour, Byron's alter-egos—whose character traits were believed to express a licentious dismissal of orthodox views and lifestyles—represent 'not only the archetypal anti-hero' but also the ultimate 'epitome of a modern myth—instantly recognisable, endlessly reinterpreted, and enduringly elusive'. Recent studies on Byron by Clara Tuite, Peter Cochran, and Edna O'Brien have focused on his scandalous life of excess and debauchery in ways that conflate the man, the poet, and the legend while often undermining the philosophical, historical, and intellectual qualities of his works. Sarah Wootton's study, however, departs from recent treatments insofar as her main contention is that the female authors she considered 'are engaged in a "double" discourse about Byron that discerns creative value in the poetry and castigates the public profile'. Thus, the popularity of this unparalleled cultural phenomenon as well as the reinterpretation of the hero in Victorian texts marks a success in the poet's critical reception and afterlife and makes readers consider the links between Romanticism, the Victorian age and popular culture.

Wootton has produced a graceful, detailed, and commendable account of the Byronic hero and its relevance to nineteenth-century women's writing and subsequent screen adaptations of their work. She places particular emphasis on 'exploring the tensions' between the Romantic age and later literary examples, rather than 'detecting parallels'. More specifically, Wootton investigates recreations of the Byronic hero in works by Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. She focuses on why Byronic presences feature so prominently in their writing, what is distinctive about their respective treatments of this figure, and how the Byronic hero is subsequently reinvented. The effect of such reinvention in modern screen adaptations is explored, ranging from works such as the BBC's successful 1995 series of *Pride and Prejudice* (dir. Andrew Davies) and Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility* (dir. Ang Lee, 1995), to other BBC adaptations such as Anthony Page's *Middlemarch* (1994), Nicholas Renton's *Wives and Daughters* (both screenplays by Andrew Davies, 1999) and Brian Percival's *North and South* (screenplay by Sandy Welch, 2004), and the more recent ITV *Northanger Abbey* (dir. Jon Jones, screenplay Andrew Davies, 2007). Wootton concentrates on three complementary forms of dialogues between Romanticism and the Victorian era: dialogues about gender roles, dialogues about masculinity, and dialogues about genre.

Although the claim that nineteenth-century literary culture was influenced in various ways by Romanticism has long been established, Wootton rightly points out that the nineteenth century female authors she selects 'have not received the sustained scholarly attention they deserve [...] specifically in terms of screen adaptations, which have yet to be explored'. Each of these female authors is the focus for two of the book's five chapters, with a little less space given to Gaskell to whom Wootton dedicates one chapter only, making the structure of this monograph a little unbalanced. As far as Romanticism is concerned, Wootton's study is not only about Byron and Austen. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Burns, Hemans, Barbauld, Southey, Scott, Percy and Mary Shelley, and European writers such as Novalis are all invoked throughout and are read alongside the nineteenth-century novels she has selected. This book ultimately is as much about Romanticism, or the legacy of Romanticism, as it is about Victorian literature and will thus appeal to readers interested in the literature of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In Chapter One, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* are paired under the rubric of changing models of masculinity in the early nineteenth century, such as the Regency rake and the Gothic villain. Excellent readings of the novels' Byronic characters contribute to Wootton's cogent reading of the connection between 'Austen's "new gentleman" and Byron's hero- villain'. Chapter Two discusses the male protagonists of *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* as instances of 'hybridised Byronic heroes' and brings this in relation to recent film adaptations of *Persuasion* (dir. Adrian Shergold, 2007) and *Pride and Prejudice* (dir. Joe Wright, 2005). Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and *North and South* are the central focus of Chapter Three and Wootton offers a detailed, persuasive account of their indebtedness to the previous period. Chapter Four offers a discussion of early works and poetry of George Eliot in which Wootton 'examines the function and fate of the Byronic across a wide range of literary forms and styles' including a short story and verse drama. Lastly, Chapter Five on Eliot's later works such as *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* is where the Byronic hero 'finally attains credibility'. The final sections of Chapter Five and the conclusion to the book further investigate how Victorian receptions of Romanticism and its writers were shaped by 'a profoundly conflicted and sophisticated rethinking of Romantic legacies'. But a stronger conclusion or afterword to the book would also have been useful. It might have been interesting to conclude the reassessment of Byronic heroes in the Victorian age with some discussion of its reception by other readers of the period (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and especially Mary Elizabeth Braddon) or its transatlantic influence on writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe. Furthermore, attention to adaptation theory in the book is lacking, and it is not entirely clear how this study situates itself in relation to Bloomian 'anxiety of influence' discourses with respect to Byronic patterns of both identification and renunciation.

Nonetheless, this is an informative monograph which prompts a re-thinking of Byron's ambivalent legacies. Elegantly written and impeccably researched, Wootton's study will be

valuable to any scholars, students, or general readers interested in both the Romantic and the Victorian age as well as in the Byron phenomenon more broadly, and in twenty-first century media and film studies. Wootton finds in Byron's creation of the Byronic hero a way into the patterns of his thinking, as they are articulated both in his poetry and in his philosophy. We can still find room on our library shelves for yet another reading on the Byronic hero. It is a remarkably detailed and clear account: the book takes on a subject that we thought we knew all about and discovers something fresh to say about it.