

The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets: Romanticism Revised. Tim Fulford Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 318. \$98.00 (hardcover) \$39.99 (paper-pack) \$26.00 (ebook).

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Romantic studies as a discipline has traditionally privileged the concerns of youth, something underlined by recent books by Ann Wierda Rowland—*Romanticism and Childhood* (2012)—and Laurie Langbauer—*The Juvenile Tradition* (2016); until recent times, it hasn't shown much of an interest in pursuing deep and sustained readings of the creative productions of writers in late life. Devoney Looser's *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* (2008) is the most notable exception, providing detailed accounts of the reception of writers such as Frances Burney, Anna Barbauld, and Maria Edgeworth in old age and considering the ways in which they sustained their longevity. Sarah Falcus's chapter on "Literature and Ageing" in the recent *Routledge Handbook to Cultural Gerontology* (2016) falls silent, however, when it comes to the Romantic period, demonstrating the general paucity of material currently out there. The subject of Tim Fulford's latest book—the late poetry of the Lake Poets—provides, therefore, a welcome opportunity to reflect on narratives of aging in poetry of the early nineteenth century, specifically the ways in which William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey, individually and collectively, rethought their roles as creative artists in their forties, fifties, and beyond.

Finding a reason why the literary output of the Lake Poets in late life has been marginalized is not difficult: a pervasive narrative framed by issues such as increased conservatism, political "apostasy" (3), recapitulation, and envy of the commercial successes enjoyed by younger writers such as Walter Scott and Lord Byron, has led to perceived diminishment of their significance by the 1830s. Fulford's intention here is firstly to explain why these views have inhaled, and rather than directly contest them, reformulate their significance in the climate

of new opportunities for creative expression in print that developed in the early nineteenth century. In that regard, the Lake Poets that emerge from this book are innovators, capitalizing on new technologies of print and illustration in the commercial book market of the 1830s and '40s, or fierce custodians of Lakeland history and culture, rather than aloof, slightly contemptuous solitaries.

This is not a book aiming to make a grand intervention in gerontological debates or to provide a manifesto for age studies in the Romantic period. Fulford approaches the subject by recontextualizing and then deftly analyzing the poetry of these writers' later years as products of "recollection" (4) not beholden to—but concerned to creatively respond to—the achievements of youth. In practice this means that Fulford shifts the date around which Lake poetry is often conceptualized from the *annus mirabilis* of 1797–98—when Coleridge and Wordsworth collaborated on what would become *Lyrical Ballads*—back to the later period of 1814–16. It was in 1814 that Francis Jeffrey, editor of the influential *Edinburgh Review*, brought to an unpleasant crescendo his attacks on Wordsworth—and by association Coleridge and Southey—in a negative review of *The Excursion*. Other prominent critics such as William Hazlitt had also turned against the Lake Poets, characterizing them as self-regarding and obscure or puerile and childish in their choice of subject matter. Fulford sees different responses from the Lakers to this mid-career crisis that would inform their late poetry: Wordsworth was initially inspired to compose the Essay Supplementary to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1815 in an attempt to shore up his earlier aesthetic. Southey, labelled a Lake Poet for the first time during this period, defiantly embraced that term and wrote poetry set in the Lakes. Coleridge, however, composed a Preface to his 1816 volume of poetry with the intention of distancing his poetics from Wordsworth's. "Lake Poet" had become a pejorative term by the second decade of the nineteenth century because, as the title of Fulford's book suggests, this label was itself a product of the experience of lateness.

Romantic Studies does have one long-standing discourse of lateness that derives from Harold Bloom's work on belatedness and the anxiety of influence. This is not necessarily an experience of old age, of course, but a feeling of arriving poetically too late in the day: of sensing one's lack of originality. Some sections of this book touch on related issues, particularly the chapter on Coleridge's 1816 volume. *Christabel*, "Kubla Khan," and "The Pains of Sleep" were first composed during the periods 1797–98 and 1803 and had a significant oral reception history before eventually being published nearly twenty years later. For Fulford, that later context explains more fully the effect of these poems' belatedness on readers. Coleridge, whose distinctive meter and incantatory tones had been copied by poets such as Scott, Byron, and even Wordsworth (in the critically panned *The White Doe of Rylstone*, 1815), found himself in the unusual position of having to demonstrate his originality in the face of imitations that were already in print. According to Fulford, Coleridge's sense that *Christabel* in particular "would seem a late poem" was acute, but this was a feature of the composition of the volume as a whole (133). The 1816 context, in this argument, shapes the poems as responses to the relationship between orality and print culture, rather than one between youth and age, wherein "Kubla Khan" is a poem about the "secondariness of writing, and, after writing, print" (144). Lateness manifests itself in Coleridge's communication of loss in the experience of translating the spoken word into print.

A less anxious Coleridge emerges in Chapter 4, in which Fulford describes the later period of the poet's career, once he had moved into semi-retirement in Highgate. The chapter explores Coleridge's relationship with Letitia Elizabeth Landon and the critically neglected poetry that he published alongside hers in annuals aimed at a female readership, such as *The Bijou* and *The Keepsake*. Here, conceptualizing aging in verse is a key issue. Fulford shows Coleridge writing back to the associations of youth with intense and spontaneous feelings in more allegorical and detached ways that suggest an experienced voice writing from "a position

of displacement from all deep emotion” (165). His “Improvvisatore” (1828), published in response to Landon’s successful *Improvvisatrice* (1824), reflects on the sincerity of that intensity “from age’s knowing yet envying perspective” (163).

One common narrative that Fulford overturns through his studies of Southey and Wordsworth is that the Lakers were generally hostile to new technologies in print culture. Fulford shows that, on the contrary, in their later careers both writers were influenced by and collaborated with artists—such as Edward Nash and William Westall—in the production of guidebooks at a time when advances in techniques such as aquatint were making the production of these books cheaper, democratizing visual print culture. Poetry was placed alongside images in these books, and Fulford includes here many reproductions of the originals to illuminate his eloquent, close textual analysis of the verse. In these chapters, Southey is interestingly represented as reconsidering the detractors of Wordsworth, demonstrating why the Lakes “made not for seclusion and perversity, but for a moral way of life that set a standard for the rest of society” (38). Similarly, Wordsworth, here, and in Fulford’s study of his turn to topographical verse in *The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets* (1820), aims for “a more informed and engaged participation in place” (61). Wordsworth writes self-consciously as an elder, disseminating local knowledge in which he is deeply invested to younger writers and tourists—as in “To Miss Blackett at her first ascent of Helvellyn”—rather than looking inward.

The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets aims to explain and revise the tropes of diminishment that have often dogged these writers and that have frequently been used to explain their literary productions post-1814. It achieves this through a strong understanding of context and reception history allied to close reading that has an assured touch. Fulford avoids making essentialist claims about aging, or what Linda and Michael Hutcheon call “supraindividual generalizations” about “late style,” preferring to treat lateness as a phase and part of the reception process

of texts. Likewise, despite the Lakers evidently being at odds with other, younger writers, Fulford bypasses Edward Said's configuration of late style as a moment when an artist "abandons communication with the established order," resulting in "a contradictory, alien relationship with it," to emphasize the Lake Poets' production of new kinds of work that was distinct from the preoccupations of their youth. I would add that while it is important not to underplay how embattled and embittered these writers sometimes felt as their reputations fluctuated with age, there is also warmth and amusement associated with growing old here, as in Southey's Lake poems about fatherhood and family considered in Chapter 1 or Coleridge seen as a wry "domesticated old gent" (166) in Chapter 4.

Southey's bad-tempered debates with Byron about the representation of colonialism, which inform *The Island* (1823) and *A Tale of Paraguay* (1824), are a different matter. The very public disagreements between the two writers saw Byron wound Southey with a satirical response to the latter's *A Vision of Judgement* (1821)—the rather pompous encomium to George III which was composed as part of his laureate duties. Fulford takes a long view on the subsequent fallout and its impact on the composition of *A Tale of Paraguay*, presenting the defense of imperialism not as a straightforward conservative movement away from the perceived Jacobinism of Southey's earlier tales—such as *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801)—but as part of his awareness of shifting contexts, and that "an age of empire was dawning," one "in which the capacity to inspire spiritual conviction would be a critical factor" (71). This still, however, leaves the impression that Southey's triumph in rendering a version of colonialism that was palatable to the Victorians—"a tale that empire-builders wanted to hear" (102) as Fulford puts it in Chapter 2—was a pyrrhic one and that Byron's liberalism carried more conviction then as now.

The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets goes some way to redressing the "love affair with youth" (1) that has dominated critical responses to the Romantic period in the last hundred years. It does so by overturning the

widely accepted teleological narrative of the Lakers' waning powers, but resists substituting one that exhorts unexpected late richness. Instead these texts, some of which actively address the experience of aging and some which do not, are largely considered as part of the work of poets feeling the shared pressure to sell books or to reflect their individual concerns for aspects of the Lakeland culture they had embraced. As the Lake Poets redefined themselves in relation to the changing literary marketplace of the nineteenth century, as much as to their own earlier literary success, they found new routes to publication; perhaps Fulford's real achievement is to remind us of just how much poetry of the Romantic period is routinely neglected when we allow qualities such as invention, imagination, and spontaneity to be uncritically associated with youth.

WORKS CITED

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