

was based on a desire for courtly values in the face of the unsatisfactory nature of actual conflict. Resisting a popular critical tendency to dwell on the French Revolution to the exclusion of all else contextual, Labbe emphasises the importance of the American War of Independence to the romance tradition. However, the malleability that made the fantasy of romance so useful, also meant it was potentially dangerous, as Labbe explores in her chapter on the Della Cruscan. Exploiting the erotic potential of romance, Della Cruscan poetry remains sexual rather than sensual. Labbe examines the Emma/Henry exchange of letters, published in *The World* from 1787 to 1788, in detail. She thus offers a refreshing alternative to the standard critical approach, which involves the somewhat tired repetition of the terms of William Gifford's satire, *The Baviad and Maeviad*.

The third chapter relates the heroic quest to the truisms of the search for Romantic selfhood. In an ambitious attempt to tackle the romance in the work of both Coleridge and Keats, Labbe finds that each, while invoking the structures of romance, weakened its viability; each articulates the suspicion that the romantic hero had been damaged by hypocrisy and habit.

Labbe seems more at home in her fourth chapter, examining a crucial element of the romance, the love match. She emphasises that for Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans death, rather than love, is often the outcome of heterosexual coupling. Avoiding the usual equation of romance with fraud and epic with force, Labbe argues that in these romances the efforts of the desiring female to repress her urges generates displaced violence: 'the many dead men in their poetic romances function as markers of female desire' (p. 102). The last chapter shows these violent aspects of love taken to their logical extreme in the work of Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Byron. The influence of Byron upon Landon is frequently mentioned, but, as in Jerome McGann's and Daniel Riess's useful *L. E. L.: Selected Writings* (1997), it is rarely explored in any detail. Labbe therefore offers a necessary comparison of the mistrust with which each poet viewed heterosexual love. Both saw it as destructive, presenting the roles of hero and heroine as ultimately flawed. As a result, each turned to a natural medium in which to suggest the exaggeration of heterosexual roles, that is, melodrama.

*The Romantic Paradox* acknowledges, even in its title, both the 'charms' and 'snares' of romance. The malleability of the genre, which generated such critical unease in the 1790s, is still present. The ubiquity of romance, whether transformed, challenged or fragmented, remains a source of anxiety in this study. However, in recording the violence done to it and with it, Labbe has provided a much-needed examination of the use of romance in the period.

Fiona Price

*Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Ed. by Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Rochester, NY: Camden House/Boydell & Brewer, 1999), 229 pp.

*The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*. By Timothy Morton, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, Vol. 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xiii + 282 pp.

Whilst we still await the next big idea in philosophical thought to emerge in the new millennium, the relentlessly mischievous spectre of postmodernism still haunts the world of literary criticism.

The introduction to *Biofictions* starts with a cheerful admission that the enduring academic *zeitgeist* approves of uncertainty, ambiguity, and fragmentation, and distrusts ideas of totality and synthesis. It is also noted that the boundaries between biography (or 'life-writing', as it is increasingly termed) and fiction are becoming blurred. This has led to the recognition by the authors of what is here described as 'historiographic metafiction' — that is, novels, plays, and films characterised by overt historical referents. Hence, this collection of essays (which arose from a series of graduate seminars at the University of Paderborn during 1991/2) sets out to criticize works of this genre within the context of what they see as the problematic relationship between their subjects of contemplation and Western traditions of history and cultural heritage. This exercise itself is potentially problematic, we are warned, as biofictional texts both *deconstruct* and *reconstruct* historical knowledge at the same time. None of this, it must be said, bodes well for readers expecting clarification of such matters.

Such ambiguities and paradoxes are, of course, by no means exclusively phenomena of our own times. Thomas Chatterton is cited as 'the master forger' who epitomized the pre-Romantic dissolution of fact and fiction, copy and original (p. 13).

Whilst Keats features little in any of the essays, there are three chapters of particular interest to Shelleyans. In 'The Truth of Fiction — The Fiction of Truth: Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters*' (pp. 106–19), Beate Neumeier examines Chernaik's 1991 novel as a reassessment of the Shelley circle as perceived by the four women in the poet's life: his first wife Harriet, Mary his second, Claire Clairmont, and Fanny Godwin. The novel's notable gender-political implication of focusing on the points of view of four women (two of whom committed suicide) is subsumed in this critique by considerations of the issue of multiperspectivity. The four different views drawn from the women's own letters and journals are themselves shown raise internal tensions between subjectivity and the unattainability of any universal truth.

Neumeier's analysis also notes how the novel plays upon the resurrection of Mary Shelley in recent times from being an obscure figure in the shadow of her husband and her creation *Frankenstein*, to her new status as an imaginative writer whose works are worthy of admission to a reassessed literary canon.

This view of Mary Shelley is taken up by Ramona M. Ralston and Sid Sondergard in 'Biodepictions of Mary Shelley: The Romantic Woman Artist as Mother of Monsters' (pp. 201–13). Concentrating on film adaptations and derivatives of her



novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's creation is assessed as a seemingly limitlessly adaptable work, lending itself to reinterpretation to reflect the values of whichever generation has re-set it on celluloid. At one and the same time, Mary Shelley is immediately distanced from her creation, yet her work simultaneously acquires an enduring relevance.

Uwe Böker looks at theatrical dramatisations of Percy Shelley's life in 'Ann Jellicoe's and Howard Brenton's Shelley' (pp. 77–95). Where postmodernist criticism and theory are above all concerned with the author's use of language and the significance of text, notes Böker, dramatists are more inclined to look into the personality of their subject.

Nevertheless, we are told, playwrights too will inevitably impose the values of their own times upon historical figures and events. Thus, Ann Jellicoe's play *Shelley, or The Idealist* (1966) is shown to have reflected the beginnings of a new culture of radical dissent in the 1960s. However, critics of Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* (1984) are themselves taken to task by Böker. They dwell too much on the play's allusions to the failure of socialist ideals during the Thatcher years, she writes, at the expense of recognising its refusal to abandon hope and its message about the importance of personal conviction.

On a more general note, we are reminded that this tension between modern deconstructive readings of classic texts and our natural longing for story and history is itself Romantic. But whether these essays succeed in their mission to 'Romantically re-authorize enlightenment in the face of post-historical emptiness' is another matter.

For all their contemporary tone, essays such as these do no more to bring the Romantic world to life than the dustiest pre-war commentaries, and at best, merely shed currently fashionable sidelights on an age which nevertheless seems as distant and untouchable as ever. There is here more than a hint of indulgence in an endlessly introspective spiral of navel-gazing and subjective relativity, rather than a search for anything even remotely resembling objective truths or conclusions. Though such modish values may hold something in common with the spirit of Romanticism, one cannot help but feel that there was at least an aspiration to some goal (however vague and nebulous) in the early nineteenth century that is entirely absent from such writings and commentary as this in our own directionless age.

On its dust jacket, *The Politics of Spice* proclaims itself to employ a mixture of Marxist, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic theory to explore themes of exoticism, colonialism, and orientalism within a Romantic literary context. Timothy Morton also notes that his work is 'neither a literary history of spice, or a spicy history of literature' (p. 4). It is rather a study of how commodities are ideologically conceived in figurative language and how certain forms of figurative language and theory are ideologically conceived through commodities. The author also aims for a wide-ranging study of the relationships between poetic and culinary applications of taste.

Chapter 4, *Blood Sugar* (pp. 171–206) perhaps epitomises the book as a whole, taking its title from lines in William Cowper's 'Epigram' which equate the production of exotic luxuries such as sugar and spices with the blood and sweat of the slaves who toiled to produce them. In a chapter sub-section entitled *The Guilt Trope*, Morton

develops this theme to examine the poet's role as a confessing conscience of society at that time.

This idea is also touched upon elsewhere, most notably in his assessment of Percy Shelley's particular criticism of the spice trade. In works such as *A Vindication of a Natural Diet* and *Queen Mab*, says Morton, Shelley was taking a highly derogatory stance against global commerce, which he saw as being bad for the health of both the individual and society at large (p. 95). The emergence of vegetarianism, Morton opines, arose not only from Shelleyan revulsion at the eating of dead animals, but also from a reaction against luxury, involving a fantasy about limiting consumption to that of necessity and pure value. As Morton dryly puts it, 'The long march towards Marmite had begun' (p. 125). Keats, in stark juxtaposition, is noted to have been a conspicuous consumer, playing luxuriously with food's excessive and significant properties. Morton notes how Keats signed a copy of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* with the pseudonym 'Caviare', whilst Leigh Hunt's nickname for him was 'Junkets'.

At one point, Morton takes Shelley's implied equation of global commerce with disease and convincingly links it with present-day concerns over industrialised agriculture and the spread of BSE. However, elsewhere in his search for contemporary relevance, he goes too far in citing a ludicrous over-interpretation of a TV advertisement for Castlemaine lager to illustrate the metaphoric use of fantasy.

The author's tightly-focused view of certain historical events also raises the odd eyebrow. His assessment of the Boston Tea Party of 1773 views that protest as a flamboyant exhibition of boycotting and abstinence within a context of 'resistance to the narcotics of consumption'. There is no mention of its more usual interpretation as a symbolic act of defiance over the issue of 'taxation without representation'.

However, *The Poetics of Spice* is largely successful in illuminating how, in the author's words, it was the Romantic view of consumerism that made the natural world a shop window during the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, allowing the ambience of the shop window to be experienced as the temple of nature.

Christopher Goulding