

Young Romantics: The Tangled Lives of English Poetry's Greatest Generation. By DAISY HAY. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2010. Pp. xix, 364. Cloth, \$27.50.

In her seventies, Claire Clairmont followed the advice of Edward John Trelawney, the only other survivor of their circle, and attempted to tell her story, which has just surfaced in a (perhaps unsurprisingly) bitter fragment of memoir. "The worshippers of free love not only preyed upon one another, but preyed equally upon their own individual selves," she writes, "turning their existence into a perfect hell" (p. 307). Discovered in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection and published for the first time in Daisy Hay's engaging new book, *Young Romantics*, Clairmont's memoir has attracted the attention of general readers as well as scholars to Hay's group biography. And rightly so: *Young Romantics* will revive interest in the second-generation Romantics among those long out of college, will reach many readers who know little of them at all, and will enliven the understanding of Romantics among current college students intrigued by James Franco's well-publicized interest in Shelley and Byron. Beyond the academy, a benign Ozzymanian neglect clouds too many minds where these writers are concerned: *Frankenstein* is only a movie, Byron is a vague figure of rock-star scandal, and Shelley wrote that one poem about a bird. Therefore, in a mainstream publishing industry dominated by Steig Larsson and tales of very special dogs, the appearance of this smart book from a major house is good news indeed.

While familiar to scholars, the story of what John Keats called the "mingled yarn" of his and his friends' fortunes has the momentum and psychological complexity of a good novel, especially in Hay's telling (qtd. on p. xvii). It's all here: the Hunt brothers' trial; the Shelleys' elopement; Clairmont's affair with Byron and Byron's subsequent indifference; the deaths of the children, of Shelley, and of Byron; Mary's long struggle for financial stability; and the gradual dispersal of the remaining friends as the connective tissue of memory thins with time. Hay tactfully but fully exploits this saga's dramatic potential, with a commonsensical eye for human foible and a sure instinct for detail. "[Clairmont's] last encounter with the man who had changed her life," she writes, "was a fleeting glimpse of his carriage from the window of a public coach" (p. 216). The memoir's placement at the end of the book is the ultimate sign of a narrative instinct that never lets Hay down: this bitter culmination of Clairmont's long struggle for some suitable artistic, sexual, and economic fate has a certain novelistic inevitability, a character playing out to her logical, if sad, end—a narrative possibility developed long ago in Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888), and worth a new retelling.

Clairmont is given due prominence in Hay's narrative, which shifts smoothly among characters; so is Leigh Hunt, who's positioned here, in a way he would approve, as the well-connected writer through whom other friendships triangulate. Hay offers a full sense of his Skimpoban airiness and appalling money management, but also of his ability to comfort his friends in real need. "We must

all weep on these occasions," he wrote the Shelleys after little William's death, "& it is better for the kindly fountains within us that we should" (qtd. on p. 168). Like Clairmont, Hunt brings out the sparkle in Hay's narrative style: her description of the Hunts' nightmarish Channel crossing to Italy—storms, seasickness, and the squawking of "tormented ducks" flung against their cage walls until their wings and legs were broken—made me shudder in Shelleyan sympathy. Grounded well in scholarship about Romantic sociability, Hay makes clear that the works for which these writers are still remembered, and the lives they lived, were shaped within a network of friendships that proved astonishingly fruitful, flexible, and durable. Yet, ironically, the strength of this network could be said to have cost the lives of not only little Clara Shelley—rushed away from home on behalf of Clairmont—but of Shelley himself, sailing back across the Bay of Lerici from setting up the impetuous Hunt at the helm of the doomed journal *The Liberal*, ignoring storm warnings in several senses of the term. Hay's narrative does justice to both the empowerments and the irritations of this "web of mingled yarn" connecting talented, complex people.

The scholars among Hay's readers would have preferred that Hay include the memoir as a separate appendix and recount the story of its discovery in the Pforzheimer Collection. Yet its suitability for a nonspecialist audience is indisputable. When I assigned first-year students in my seminar on "*Frankenstein* and its Contexts" to read Hay's chapter on Clairmont's memoir, several of them read the rest of *Young Romantics* on their own. Considering the forces from biology exams to *Glee* that shunt "nonrequited" reading aside in many undergraduates' lives, this is no small thing. In 1819, Hay writes, Hunt and Vincent Novello prepared "a co-authored manual for democratic, domestic music-making. . . . to show that music could be appropriated by anyone who cared to claim it" (p. 114). *Young Romantics* similarly diffuses the "music" of these writers' lives and works to a wide audience; it won't be the last story told about them, but it is surely one of the most satisfying.

Luther College

AMY WELDON

Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action. By SUSAN J. WOLFSON. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. xviii, 382. Cloth, \$70.00; paper, \$30.00.

Susan J. Wolfson's latest book, *Romantic Interactions*, is comprised of three compelling sections cumulatively demonstrating that "irreducible events of language, as these are read and debated, written and revised, reviewed and received, constitute our most fundamental resource for describing Romantic culture" (p. 9); Wolfson selects "events of language" or "textual reflections of complex interaction" centered on three pairs of figures: Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy and William Wordsworth, and Anne Isabella Milbanke and Lord Byron (p. 8). Wolfson's magisterial close reading and historicization trace